

JazzWax

<http://www.jazzwax.com/2009/08/interview-denny-zeitlin-part-3.html>

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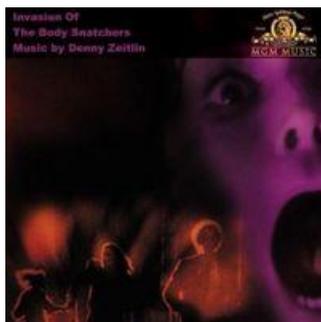
Interview: Denny Zeitlin (Part 3)

Pianist Denny Zeitlin scored just one motion picture in his career, the 1978 remake of the 1950s classic *Invasion of the Body Snatchers*. The score is notable for its combined use of symphonic brass, strings and synthesizers.

Denny's goal was to create themes and incidental music that would capture in music the paranoia and fear that's evident on-screen as San Francisco's population is steadily occupied by aliens. Ironically, the score nearly consumed Denny, who not only had to cope with the enormous demands of such an ambitious project but also manage his psychiatric practice and tend to his patients' needs.



[DENNY SCORING INVASION OF THE BODY SNATCHERS]

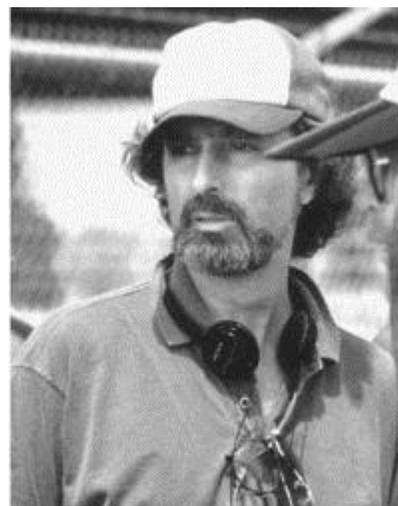


Thirty-one years after the experience, Denny's voice tenses slightly when reflecting on the project. Though Denny completed the score on time and with creative success, the pressure of doing well against a crushing deadline with no previous symphonic scoring experience left a mark, giving him a renewed appreciation of acoustic jazz.

In Part 3 of my interview with Denny, the legendary pianist talks about writing the movie score, how he coped with the taxing demands, why he called pianist Roger Kellaway, and what makes the jazz mind special:

JazzWax: How did you come to score the remake of *Invasion of the Body Snatchers* in 1978?

Denny Zeitlin: I got a call from Philip Kaufman [pictured], the movie's director. He said he had grown up in Chicago and remembered being at clubs where I had played in the early 1960s and later heard my recordings.



He said he always had it in his head to work with me on a movie score. Then he proceeded to tell me what he was working on—a remake of this science fiction movie that I had never seen.



JW: What did you think?

DZ: It sounded wonderful, particularly since he originally wanted a jazz score. So we started talking, and his concept gradually morphed into a 20th century classical music score with electronics and a bit of jazz. I had to

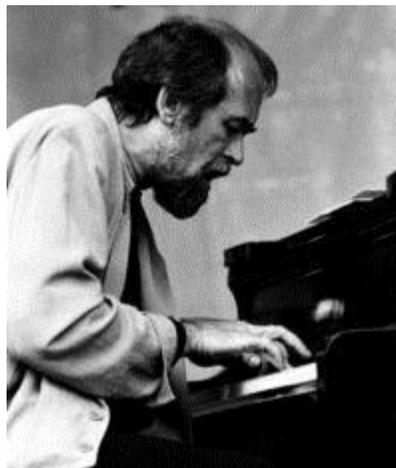
convince him and Robert Solo, his producer, that I could do this without any previous credits in the symphonic area.

I had never done that in my life. It felt daunting. But I told myself, “I just have to get these folks to think I can do it, and then I just have to do it.” I was surprised they went for it.

JW: Did the experience change you?

DZ: I think so. I’ve never worked on a project that demanded so much of me in every respect. I had just weeks to find out how Hollywood worked—how to assemble the team I needed, the contractor and a good orchestrator.

JW: Did you have any help? aided by [pianist] Roger Kellaway composed a number of scores. I “Roger, I don’t know anything how to do this. Who do I call? spoke with me for over an hour, skeleton key to the place— how to go about it. It was an generosity on his part. He ended of the symphony for me. And he



DZ: I was immensely [pictured], who had called him up and said, about Hollywood or Who do I use?” Roger and he gave me the names, caveats, hints, amazing show of up being the conductor did a magnificent job.

JW: How long did you

DZ: About 10 weeks.

have to write the score?

JW: Sounds like you mastered it pretty quickly.

DZ: I did get my arms around it, but at a cost.



JW: How so?

DZ: I had to do something I had never done before or since: I had to work half-time in psychiatry for five weeks and then close my office for five weeks. I didn't want to do this but I had to. I was faced with an enormous workload, so I had colleagues cover for me. Fortunately there were no problems with my patients.

JW: What was the experience like?

DZ: It was a total immersion in music that I had never before experienced. I was working 20-hour days. My wife would have to come downstairs at 2 a.m., grab me off the piano stool, dump me in the hot tub for five minutes and put me to bed for a few hours before I had to get up and do it all again. If I got a minute and a half of completed music done a day, I considered myself lucky.



JW: What was so draining about the project?

DZ: This was not only music for a symphonic orchestra that I was writing. I also was overdubbing electronic instruments with synthesizers and scheduling small group sessions. Then I'd come back from Los Angeles with tracks of orchestral tapes and go into a San Francisco studio to overdub additional percussion and electronics.



JW: What's that process like?

DZ: I felt like a general in an army working on logistics. It was a demanding time. In addition to all of that, there were the psychological and interpersonal demands. One thing I learned early on is that the director has to be pleased. It's his movie. If I have a different slant on an area we agreed upon, I had to be very careful to present my case in a way that he understood. Then I had to be absolutely sensitive as to whether he wanted to go in that direction. If he didn't, it was my job to be the best "police artist" on the beat.

He knows what the suspect looks like, and yet he doesn't have the language to put it in musical terms. I figured that if I asked the right questions, I'd hopefully be able to come up with music he'd approve.

JW: Sounds draining.

DZ: It took a tremendous amount of work. I would have to demo each section of music. These are called "cues" in the movie-score writing business. After I'd finish each cue, I'd demo it with synthesizers to make sure the director heard it and liked it before going on. I wanted to get his approval first before engaging Greig McRitchie, the orchestrator, and a full-scale Hollywood orchestra. I didn't want any surprises for director Phil Kaufman, where we could wind up in a control booth with him saying, "What? That doesn't work. We have to throw that out."



JW: That's a terrifying thought, isn't it?

DZ: Yes, horrifying. There are composers who have been fired summarily from the soundstage. I dreaded that happening to me.



JW: Did you have anxiety through this whole project?

DZ: Yeah, absolutely. Because I realized that at any point I could be fired just like that.

JW: How did you survive the period?

DZ: I was careful not to presume anything and was always sensitive to the director's needs. But once I understood how the process worked, I was committed to pleasing him. If I could also please myself, great. But that was a secondary concern, and I felt lucky that I ended up pleased with the score.

JW: When you were done, did you feel the experience had changed you artistically?

DZ: Not in a fundamental way. I certainly emerged far more sophisticated about writing orchestral music. I think I was enriched by the experience sonically and texturally.

JW: Were you fed up with film music after the project?

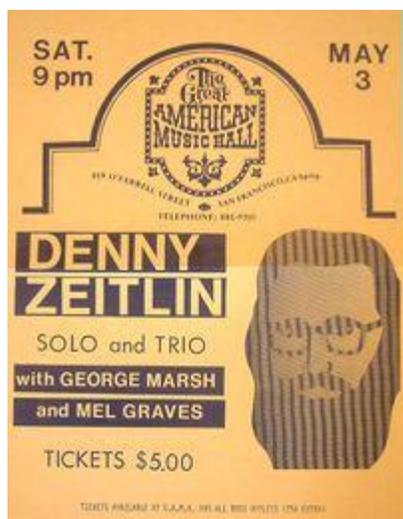
DZ: Yes. The experience had been exhilarating but exhausting and had ripped me away from everything else that had been dear to me. I said to myself, "I'm never going to do that again." I also wanted to get back to the absolute purity of acoustic music, and it was some years before I even began to add electronics back into my life



[PHOTO OF DENNY SCORING IN 1978 BY JOSEPHINE ZEITLIN]

JW: After working on a project with carefully orchestrated music, jazz improvisation must have felt like a relief. What do you make of the jazz mind?

DZ: I'm not sure what the jazz mind is. How do you define it?



JW: It's a mind that can remember all of the technical aspects of music yet be able to improvise freely and hopefully brilliantly.

DZ: In addition to the ability to integrate the Western discipline and Eastern ecstatic qualities that we talked about earlier, I think the jazz mind as you've defined it has a hunger for newness and novelty. The jazz mind has a desire

to constantly create something that hasn't been done before. But I think there also are psychological issues involved among the people who do the best work.

JW: What do you mean?

DZ: For example, the capacity to suspend conscious control is vital for a performing artist. Most great jazz musicians are relatively unafraid of making mistakes or public humiliation. If one can learn to be self-compassionate and to appreciate that jazz by its very nature is imperfect, and that there will always be errors, and if you can learn to use these errors to make new music, that's a big part of the deal.



JW: Do you think drug use in the 1940s and 1950s stemmed in part from that fear of performing, making mistakes and the dread of public humiliation?

DZ: Yes, I think that was likely the motive for a percentage of musicians who used drugs when they played. But drugs can function in a number of ways. For other musicians, drug use likely stemmed from feeling guilty about being successful. It's a tremendously pervasive theme that one encounters when doing psychotherapy.

JW: Interesting. How so?

DZ: Some people sabotage themselves because they don't feel they deserve to have what they consciously want. And the reason for not deserving it often originates when some or all family members were unsuccessful or unhappy or tortured in some way.

Tomorrow, Denny continues to evaluate the jazz mind and debunks the myth that dysfunctional behavior and positive artistic output are related. He also talks about troubled jazz pianists he would have most liked to have helped psychologically, and why soloing and accompanying are as important to psychotherapy as they are to jazz.

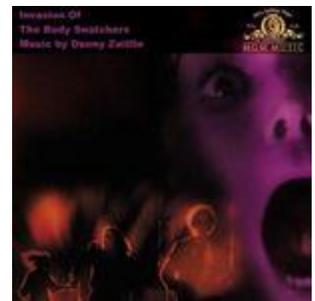
JazzWax tracks: Denny's score for the 1978 remake of *Invasion of the Body Snatchers* is available as a download at iTunes and at Amazon [here](#). Denny's *Time Remembers One Time Once*

was recorded live at the Keystone Korner in

San Francisco in 1981. It was Denny's first album since completing his film score and exhibits a warm return to acoustic jazz with

just bassist Charlie Haden. There's a fabulous recording of *The Dolphin* on the album. You can download *Time Remembers One Time Once* at iTunes or at Amazon [here](#).

Denny Zeitlin/Charlie Haden
Time Remembers One Time Once



For more on Denny, visit his site [here](#).

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

<http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=gJ9omC1PcRU>