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Interview: Denny Zeitlin (Part 4)

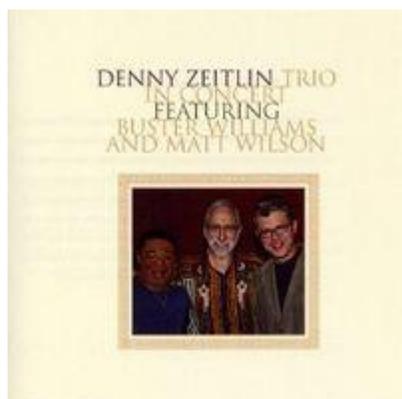
What you notice almost immediately when interviewing pianist Denny Zeitlin is his curiosity. Denny's certainly gratified to have someone ask him questions about his career and creative work. But he's not above asking a few innocent questions of his own, especially when he wants to better understand the questioner's slant. Denny's a great listener, and like most attentive listeners, he's empathetic, which is a fancy word for caring.

[Photo: Denny, after landing a bonefish in The Bahamas]

You can hear Denny's empathy on his current album, *Denny Zeitlin Trio in Concert* (Sunnyside). Released this year, the album features a 20-minute, two-part

version of *The Night Has 1,000 Eyes* that starts out swirling like brushes on a snare and eventually shoots off in many different

directions. Those paths were chosen by Denny while listening closely to what his sidemen, Buster Williams and Matt Wilson, were playing. It's a fascinating recording.



In Part 4 of my interview series with Denny, the legendary pianist and psychiatrist talks about whether dysfunctional behavior is required for creative output, and the role that empathy plays in both his playing and medical practice:

JazzWax: Why have so many jazz artists spent so much time destroying themselves with drugs and other types of negative behavior?

Denny Zeitlin: Every individual's motivations are different, of course. But I can say from experience that some artists who rise beyond what their family members have achieved somehow feel disloyal and undeserving.

It's frequently termed "survivor guilt." It's a very common theme, and you see this often with performance artists who get great reviews and are revered.

They feel it's all too much. They focus on mistakes and can't take compliments. They always have to turn a rose into a thorn.

JW: Can such artists overcome these psychological hurdles?

DZ: Yes, if they're able to face their psychological blocks and get into the zone where creativity can flower. The process is a challenge. The most important artists have found ways to deal with this. Some have rituals before they play. Others embrace a whole way of life that may work for them that doesn't work for others—through a philosophy or religion, for example. Psychotherapy can be extremely helpful in this situation.



JW: If there's one jazz musician you would like to have analyzed, who would it be?

DZ: I don't have a feeling about that. I've never said to myself, "I'd really love to do in-depth psychotherapy with this person or that person." More often, I wish there was a time warp and I could go back and be helpful psychologically to certain musicians like Bud Powell [pictured] or Thelonious Monk. That concept speaks to me more than figuring out what makes someone tick.

JW: But would analysis have crushed their creativity—artistically neutering Monk or Powell, so to speak?

DZ: Well, you know, there is this point of view that great art, at its height, comes out of madness. It's certainly true that there have been artists in every field who have had psychotic periods in their life. But I'm not convinced that their greatest work wasn't done in spite of that rather than because of it.



And I have not personally worked with artists where effective and good psychotherapy turned off their spigot of creativity. In most cases it has opened it.

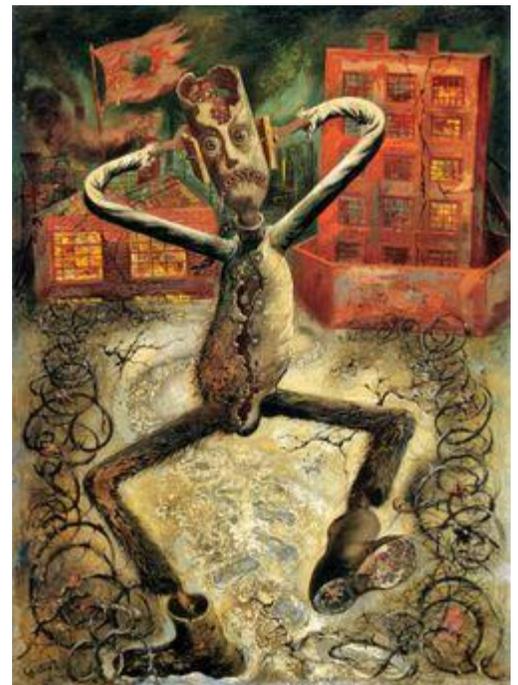


JW: How so?

DZ: For example, think about somebody who constantly feels guilty about allowing himself to be as powerful an improviser as he can be and who constantly de-skills himself on the bandstand and barely can hold onto a gig. If this person gets into psychotherapy and frees himself from feeling guilty, and he can then kick ass with all the healthy aggression that this implies, you can see how that player could be incredibly empowered and more creative and effective in what he's doing.

JW: What you're arguing is that there's no necessary connection between dysfunctional behavior and positive artistic output.

DZ: That's right. I wouldn't hold onto the romantic notion that you have to be crazy, angry or dysfunctional to produce great art. My experience with patients has been quite the opposite. But I wouldn't want to presume to say that there aren't artists in history who became highly creative because they entered certain psychotic states. I just think it's unfortunate that people tend to veer toward that as a romantic ideal. [Pictured: *The Grey Man Dances* by George Grosz, 1949]



JW: Are there similarities between Denny Zeitlin the psychiatrist, and Denny Zeitlin the jazz pianist?

DZ: Yes [laughs]. The two are quite similar.



JW: Similar?

DZ: Yes, both activities involve the deepest forms of empathy and communication. The act of accompanying is a powerful common denominator. Whether I'm in my office with a patient or on the bandstand with my trio, a big part of my job is to comp [support] as effectively as I can to help

patients tell their story or to help my bandmates perform. The more effectively I'm able to do that, the more effective the psychotherapy or jazz is. [Pictured from left: Bassist Buster Williams, Denny, and drummer Matt Wilson]

JW: What about soloing?

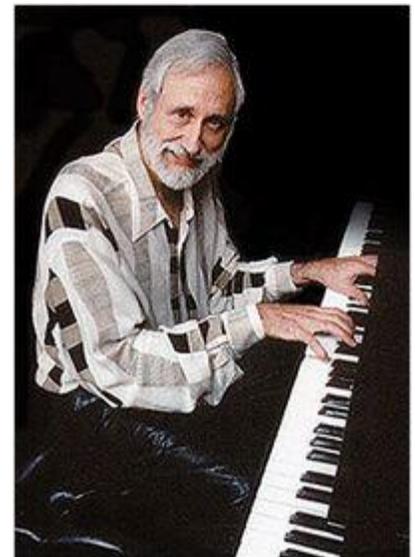
DZ: The act of soloing is much more prominent on the music side but occurs at points in psychotherapy as well.

JW: But isn't there a disconnect here?

DZ: How do you mean?

JW: On stage, you're accompanying people who have full control of their creative forces. In your office, your "soloist" patient isn't in control and is trying to come to grips with one or more emotional problems.

DZ: Yes, that's true, But the parallel holds. In music, a good accompanist helps the soloist find things he may not have necessarily discovered otherwise. As an accompanist, you present possibilities on which the soloist can build an idea that otherwise wouldn't have occurred. You're not just a catalyst. You become part of the chemical reaction. The same is true with patients. Underneath both activities—soloing or accompanying—there is the deepest form of empathy.



JW: How exactly does empathy play a role?

DZ: When I'm doing my most effective work as a musician playing with other musicians, I try to lose that positional sense of self so I can enter their musical world and merge with what they're doing.

With a patient in my office, I do my most effective work when I'm able to enter their psychological life so deeply that I can really seem to feel what it is that he or she is feeling. Yet in both cases, there's a part of me that is still available, that is able to pull back and observe the process that both of us are in.

JW: How does this work when you're playing music?

DZ: Even though I'm not very consciously aware of structure and form while playing, there's a part of my mind that's very involved. So there's an analytic function that's wide-awake and working away when playing.



JW: So being able to move back and forth between psychotherapy and jazz for you isn't nearly as foreign as one might think?

DZ: That's right. They're both disciplines of mind and heart, and involve a desire to become part of the experience while simultaneously being able to evaluate and offer suggestions that shape the solution. That's why I don't feel a disjointed quality when working with a patient in my office for an hour and then scooting up to my piano to play for an hour and then going back to

seeing a patient. Psychotherapy, like jazz performance, requires the act of being an empathetic listener and a creative participant.

JazzWax tracks: Denny's latest album, *Denny Zeitlin Trio in Concert* (Sunnyside), was recorded at The Jazz Bakery in Los Angeles and The Outpost Performance Space in Albuquerque, NM, in 2001, 2004 and 2006. The album is available as a download at iTunes or on CD [here](#).

