

DOWNBEAT

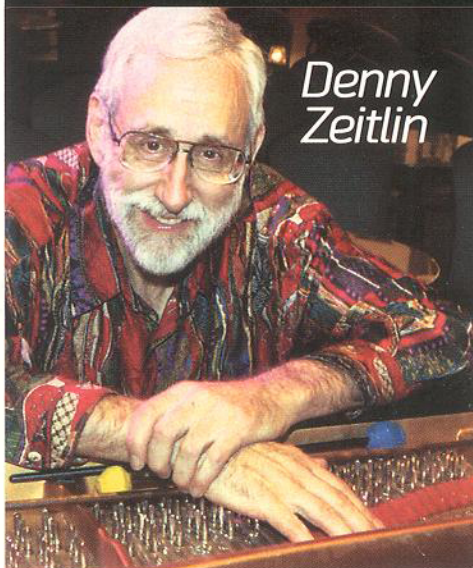
September 2004

VOLUME 71 – NUMBER 9

“...an extraordinarily sensitive and brilliantly virtuosic pianist and composer...”

Backstage With ...

By Michael Jackson



Denny Zeitlin

have independent lines going, multiple textures, layerings of sounds and feelings. It's like a whole orchestra in itself.

DID YOUR EXPANSIVE, PANORAMIC APPROACH DRAW YOU TO FILM MUSIC?

I stumbled upon that opportunity to compose music for *Invasion Of The Body Snatchers* in 1978. I never thought I'd get a chance to score a Hollywood film, usually you have to live down there, spend 10 years knocking on doors, then get a low budget film with kazoo and harmonica to work with. Originally, [director] Philip [Kaufman] was thinking of a jazz score for the film but it morphed into something 20th-century symphonic/electronic, and I had to convince Philip that I was capable of doing that without any credentials.

Denny Zeitlin is perhaps best known as the composer of the ballad "Quiet Now" and also for his theme music to the remake of *Invasion Of The Body Snatchers*. A practicing psychiatrist and teacher at the University of California, Zeitlin remains an extraordinarily sensitive and brilliantly virtuosic pianist and composer, as attested to on his recent *Slickrock* (MaxJazz). We caught up with Zeitlin at Joe Segal's Jazz Showcase in Chicago after a luxurious week of trio engagements with drummer Matt Wilson and bassist Buster Williams.

PRESUMABLY YOU HAVE RETIRED FROM THE DAY GIG, WORKING SO INTENSIVELY WITH A TOP-FLIGHT GROUP LIKE THIS?

Not at all. I have a full-time psychiatric practice back in Marin County and still teach at the university, but try to keep music active. Psychiatry gets woven into music.

HAVE MATT AND BUSTER REQUESTED INTERPRETATIONS OF THEIR DREAMS ON THIS TOUR?

No, I think they sense I'm off duty.

DO YOU HAVE CLIENTS THAT ARE MUSICIANS?

I have a slightly larger number of people in the performing arts. Some of them know about my own work and feel I'll be able to connect better with them in terms of issues of creativity. The whole psychology of creativity is an area that interests me.

YOUR PLAYING IS AMBIDEXTROUS, A LOT OF NIMBLE PARALLEL LINES. ARE YOUR LEFT AND RIGHT BRAINS IN UNUSUAL HARMONY GIVEN THE CHALLENGES OF YOUR DUAL PROFESSION?

I've always wanted to think with both hands. The piano is such an amazing animal, there are so many things you can do:

DURING YOUR KALEIDOSCOPIC TAKE ON "IT COULD HAPPEN TO YOU" THERE ARE SHORT PASSAGES THAT SOMEWHAT RECALL THE EVEN-TEMPERED TOUCH OF LENNIE TRISTANO.

Tristano was one of my early piano influences, as were George Shearing, Bud Powell, Dave Brubeck and Thelonious Monk. But there were really three pivotal people in my career. The first was Billy Taylor, who my father invited to Sunday dinner to hear my fledgling trio when I was 15. The second big encourager was George Russell, who I hung out with and studied with in 1963. He is an unsung hero in the history of jazz and 20th-century classical music, and has been a tremendous influence. Then there was an encounter with Bill Evans, who was so encouraging about my first trio album.

YOUR PLAYING IS QUITE DENSE, SO THE SUPPORT OF THE RIGHT RHYTHM SECTION IS CRITICAL.

It's not like I'm just looking for accompanists. There's a lot of interaction and space, lots of room for interpersonal commentary in this group.

WHICH IS YOUR SPECIALTY IN THE OTHER FIELD.

That's the big commonality between psychiatry and jazz, that kind of discourse and empathy with the people you're with that allows you to sometimes even lose the positional sense of the self. You get so involved with the activity that it becomes pure activity. That's what ecstasy means—being outside oneself. If you can get into an ecstatic state, it means losing your own boundary for the moment.

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