

DENNY ZEITLIN ON MOSAIC

Ted Gioia, Director, www.jazz.com March 22, 2009

In the early 1980s, Gene Lees surveyed more than 60 jazz pianists to find out which keyboardists they most admired. He asked them to pick the “best,” the “most influential” and their “personal favorites” from the entire history of jazz, including both living and deceased artists. The results were dominated by the expected names: Art Tatum topped the list of the “best” and “most influential”; Bill Evans was most often cited as the “personal favorite.” Oscar Peterson, Bud Powell, Herbie Hancock and the other “usual suspects” also appeared on the list.

Yet Dr. Denny Zeitlin’s name figured prominently on the various ballots, with especially high markings when these elite pianists were asked to pick their personal favorites—a result all the more surprising since Zeitlin had spent his entire career as a part time musician.

Early on, he had decided on a calling in medicine, and had relegated jazz to a “sideline.” His dual career brings new meaning to the term “multitasking.” I have been around many brilliant, achievement-oriented people in my life, but Denny makes my short list of the most impressive individuals I have encountered. By the way, I once sat next to a medical expert on a plane, who knew Denny only as a doctor. She was amazed to learn from me that he had done so much in the jazz world, given how well he is respected in the medical field. And jazz fans may not know about Zeitlin's formidable reputation as a wine connoisseur. The more you learn about him, the more you will wonder: “When *does* he find time to practice?”

When I wrote my book [The History of Jazz](#) a few years back, I called attention to Zeitlin’s work, and made a case for his importance in the evolution of the jazz keyboard and modern piano trio. I saw that he had been applying techniques back in the 1960s that strikingly foreshadowed cutting edge jazz piano approaches of later decades. If you wanted, you could even come up with some colorful angle, and call Dr. Zeitlin the “Brad Mehldau of 1964” or the “forerunner of the ECM sound” or concoct some other generalization, touching on this futuristic element in his playing. Yet with Denny, all labels of this sort are merely vague approximations, and the best way to understand what his music represents is to listen to it carefully.

Nonetheless I knew that the readers of my book would have few chances to appreciate his artistry. It wasn’t just because Zeitlin seldom performs (and very rarely in the New York clubs where the opinion leaders of the jazz world congregate), but even more due to the scandalous state of his recorded legacy.

For example:

(1) The obvious place to start in listening to Zeitlin was his debut as a sideman on Jeremy Steig’s recording *Flute Fever*. When this album was released, Bill Evans praised it

lavishly in a Blindfold Test in Downbeat. But these days you won't find it easy to hear this music—Steig's album has been out of print for ages.

(2) The next place to go would be Zeitlin's piano trio recordings for Columbia, made under the direction of John Hammond. These are the albums that established Denny's reputation in jazz circles, and serve as the cornerstone of his oeuvre. Good luck finding them. Columbia / Sony never released these sessions on CD, and they were taken off the market in LP format shortly after they were issued.

(3) In the late 1960s and early 1970s, Zeitlin plunged into new waters, mixing electronic and acoustic currents, odd time meters, tight and loose improvisational structures—the whole nine yards, so to speak. His indie label 1973 release *Expansion* earned a glowing five star review in Downbeat, which proclaimed it “a masterpiece.” By any measure, this was one of the most exciting jazz albums of the era. But this LP soon became even harder to find than the Columbia releases. It is still out of print.

(4) Zeitlin's follow-up *Syzygy* from 1977 showed his keyboard conception continuing to evolve in exciting new directions. But don't even try to find a copy of this release. You will have a better chance of getting a 1955 doubled-die penny in your change at McDonald's.

(5) Columbia recorded Zeitlin in a two-piano format with Herbie Hancock in 1982 at San Francisco's War Memorial Opera House. Only one track was ever issued, and it soon disappeared from the market. There is at least one more track that was never released. I was at the concert and can attest to the importance of this music, but I have given up any hopes of seeing it issued on CD.

(6) The next year, Zeitlin participated in a double-album tribute to Bill Evans, produced by Herb Wong, and featuring what is probably the most impressive list of jazz keyboardists to ever collaborate on a single project. In addition to Denny, the performers included Chick Corea, Herbie Hancock, John Lewis, George Shearing, McCoy Tyner, Teddy Wilson, etc. This LP quickly went out of print and is unavailable on compact disk.

To sum up: Zeitlin put together a stunning body of work as a young man, but almost no one has heard it. Fans haven't heard it in decades and even many critics don't know about it . . . and they could hardly even find this music if they wanted to check it out. It almost seemed as if some perverse deity was determined on erasing Denny Zeitlin's contributions to jazz during the key early decades of his career.

This turn of events disappoints me as a jazz writer, but even more as a fan. These Zeitlin recordings are the kind of music I put on the CD player for my own personal enjoyment. But, for the most part, they haven't been made available on CD, and my LPs now have more snaps, crackles and pops than a cauldron of Rice Krispies during a milk storm.

Yet finally the cruel fates have relented, and in a wonderful turn of events, Mosaic has started reissuing the Zeitlin trio sides from the 1960s—and not only the previously

released material, but also top notch outtakes that even Denny had forgotten about. The recent Mosaic three CD set includes music recorded for Cathexis, Carnival and Zeitgeist, and represents the complete studio sessions from the period 1964-67. I was sad to see the fine Shining Hour: Live at the Trident tracks omitted from the compilation. But this disappointment was more than compensated by Mosaic's promise to issue these at a later date, along with an "abundance of unreleased material" from this 1964 live album.

So I still have more than a few tracks on my wish list for future release. But for the time being I am celebrating. Finally, the Zeitlin studio trio sessions from the 1960s are available to the jazz world. . . .

THE PIANISM OF DENNY ZEITLIN

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John Hammond, the great talent scout for Columbia, was always on the lookout for artists who broke the rules—he championed Billie Holiday and Benny Goodman in the 1930s and launched the careers of Dylan and Springsteen half a lifetime later. But it would be hard to imagine a less typical auditioning artist than the one who sat on the piano bench in Columbia Record's New York studios that day in 1963.

Denny Zeitlin was in his mid-20s and still hadn't made his first album. While others of his generation had been taking sideman gigs with name jazz bands or scuffling for work in New York, Zeitlin was in Baltimore, studying medicine at Johns Hopkins University School of Medicine. (In case you don't follow healthcare pedagogy, let me note that this is considered by many as the premier—and most demanding—medical school in the nation.) Zeitlin had traveled to New York not for a gig, or even an audition with Mr. Hammond. He had come to New York for Columbia the University (where he was participating in a ten-week fellowship) not Columbia the record label.

Jack Reilly recently shared an anecdote about auditioning for Columbia the previous day, and having the session quickly come to an end because he wanted to play his original compositions and not standards. Now Zeitlin was in the hot seat, and Hammond must have been impressed. Dr. Zeitlin soon found himself in the strange position of being signed by the label and groomed for jazz stardom, while finishing his medical degree and preparing for his internship at San Francisco General Hospital.

It was inevitable that Columbia and Zeitlin would eventually part ways. The challenges of a dual career prevented Zeitlin from pursuing the round-the-year touring and full time commitment to jazz that studio execs expect from artists on the company's roster. But the music Zeitlin made during this brief interlude ranks among the finest jazz piano work of the era. On his studio projects Cathexis, Carnival and Zeitgeist—long out of print but finally made available on a Mosaic reissue a few weeks ago—and the still hard-to-find Live at the Trident, Zeitlin was redefining the jazz keyboard vocabulary and establishing a conception of the piano trio that strikingly anticipated the later evolution of the music.

I remember talking to Denny some years back about his Columbia recordings, and probing him about the existence of unreleased gems in the tapes. He dismissed the idea, claiming that there was little of interest beyond the material that had shown up on the albums. And this remained his attitude until Mosaic sent him 17 outtakes from these mid-1960s sessions, of which he approved 15 for inclusion on the new box set. These are not just alternate versions of the master takes, but include original compositions and other new material. By any measure, this Mosaic release (available in a limited edition of 5,000 copies) is now the place to begin in coming to grips with this important pianist.

And why is Denny Zeitlin important? There is the obvious matter of his formidable technical command of the instrument. His touch, his dynamics, his clarity of execution are exemplary. But even more to the point, Zeitlin came to grips with virtually all of the pressing issues facing the jazz keyboardists of his generation. These were matters that most of his contemporaries addressed partially or with varying degrees of success, or (in some instances) tried to ignore. But Zeitlin's penetrating intellect and vision allowed him to find solutions where others merely encountered problems.

These were the looming issues in jazz pianism during the mid-1960s:

(1) **How to balance the trade-off between the quest for “freedom” (a pervasive issue of the day) with the value of structure.** Zeitlin juggled these two opposed goals with such fluency that he even managed to create a viable rapprochement between them. Someone once tagged him as the “Dave Brubeck of Free Jazz”—and that odd sobriquet is not entirely inappropriate.

(2) **How to incorporate longer structural forms into jazz composition while retaining (and enhancing) the vitality of traditional song forms.** I can't think of a pianist of this period who did a better job of pushing into longer forms that still were taut and supple—listen to Zeitlin's exceptional recordings of “Blue Phoenix” or “Carnival” or “Mirage” for some very striking examples of this.

(3) **How to deal with odd meters in a way that was fluid, idiomatic and not contrived:** Zeitlin's work on “Mirage” is especially fascinating. At one point in this piece he follows a structure notated as 3 / 3 / 5 / 5 / 2 / 13 / 4 / 4 / 3 / 3 / 3 / 13. Yet the overall effect is almost of a type of metered jazz without barlines. Once again, it is hard to think of another jazz pianist of this period whose structural thinking was at such a high level.

(4) **How to bring orchestral textures into a jazz piano vocabulary that had become thinned out and pared down since the 1940s.** The old stride piano players had often derided the bebop keyboardists for being “one-hand” musicians, who could play fast lines with their right hand, but often did little else. In the 1970s, jazz piano would start to reverse directions and bring in a wider range of two-handed techniques. But Denny Zeitlin was already moving in this direction in the early 1960s. Pianists often talk about their chord “voicings”—but this term does not do justice to the full range of textures and sound tapestries that Zeitlin delivers at the keyboard on these Columbia sessions.

In each of these instances, Zeitlin faced the issue head-on, and came up with a robust solution. And, just as important, did so in an integrated, holistic way. Everything he plays has his own personal stamp on it. Nothing comes across as tenuous or forced or merely experimental. Listening to these old tracks, which sound so fresh today, I am reminded of the adage that the experimenting should take place during the musician's practice and preparation, and when the band shows up on stage, the time for experimentation is over. Certainly these Columbia trio recordings reveal a poised artist in complete control of his material, and with a clear idea of where he wants to take it.

A few years later, when synthesizers and electric keyboards captured the attention of the jazz world, Zeitlin was again at the forefront. That music is not included on this set—and who knows when this musician's recordings for the Arch Street label will ever see light of day. But trust me on this: Denny Zeitlin was equally adept at managing the trade-offs between electric and acoustic, the conflict between commercial and artistic considerations, that came to the fore during the 1970s.

Denny Zeitlin has enjoyed a remarkable life by any measure, yet his contributions to jazz have too long been obscured by the fickle decisions of record company execs who have kept the music from the first twenty years of his career out of print. The release of the Mosaic reissue, and a fine new trio CD on Sunnyside, give us a good opportunity to reexamine this artist, and savor anew his contributions to the art form.