

Denny Zeitlin Interview with Joel Chriss for Hot House Magazine April, 2017

1- You've been playing music nearly since birth. Do you recollect what drew you to music as a child?

Both parents were musical and played the family Steinway. I remember being drawn to the sound and crawling up on their laps and putting my little hands on theirs, going along for the ride kinesthetically. It seemed magical.

2- What memories or musicians stand out from when you were a teenager starting to play gigs in and around Chicago where you're from?

Playing Dixieland part of my first year in high school, but quickly gravitating into bebop; forming my own trio "The Cool Tones" and playing gigs at parties and bars; using a fake ID to get into the Chicago jazz clubs and staying out all night immersed in the music; the excitement of being able to play with better and better players; how my parents supported my involvement by going to jazz clubs in NYC and bringing back messages from some of my idols on cocktail napkins.

3- You've presented workshops on "Unlocking the Creative Impulse: The Psychology of Improvisation," and have worked with a number of artists over the years. Are there any recurring themes in your psychotherapy with them? The most common obstacles to entering a "flow" state where the spark of creativity is most easily ignited are a fear of loss of control; fear of failure; and guilt about being successful.

4- You've lived multiple lives as a musical artist, psychiatrist, professor (at University of CA @ SF). Did you continue to play professionally while you were studying medicine @ Johns Hopkins? How have you kept a balance between these demanding worlds? A big gift from my parents was their support of my wish to have a dual career in medicine and music. The challenge has been balance. All choices involve some compromise; I've tried to maintain my focus on what feels like the "heart" of music and psychiatry. Although the path of pre-medical studies in college, medical school, and then specialty training in psychiatry was demanding, I always found ways to keep developing as a musician. There was time for gigs, some formal study of composition, and always good luck in finding great players, like Gary Bartz and Billy Hart in Baltimore when I was at John Hopkins.

5- A couple of BeBop heavyweights I believe you played with in the late 1950s were Johnny Griffin and Ira Sullivan. Is that when you mastered that language? My college years (1956-60) at the University of Illinois in Champaign were particularly formative, playing with people like Joe Farrell, Jack McDuff, and Wes Montgomery locally, and in Chicago with folks like Johnny Griffin, Ira Sullivan, Bob Cranshaw, and Wilbur Ware. All those gigs and jam sessions helped me grow as a musician.

6- Tell me something about influences and mentorship in both your life as a musician and doctor? In both careers there have been many people whom I have admired, been inspired and influenced by, studied with, and in one instance, mentored by. I'm grateful for the broad exposure to so many experts and innovators. Billy Taylor, Bill Evans, and George Russell were important musicians who believed in my music and encouraged me at several important points in my career. Their basic message to trust my music and do my own thing was extremely supportive. There were parallel people in psychiatry, including a 30 year mentorship with Joseph Weiss, a psychiatrist and psycho-analyst who developed a major approach to psychotherapy called Control-Mastery Theory.

7- You'll be playing both solo and trio with Buster Williams and Matt Wilson @ Mezzrow (NYC) this month. Talk about both settings?

There is something wonderfully limitless and challenging about being on-stage or in the studio by myself. In many ways, this is the most intensely personal musical statement. I hope to be open to the moment, drawing on the worlds of jazz, classical, rock, funk, and avant garde, and allowing the music to go where it wants. But I've also been involved in trio performance since high school, powerfully attracted to the combination of piano, bass, and drums, and have recorded most frequently in this format. The piano, a "string-cussion" instrument, has an affinity for both bass and drums, and all three together ideally create an equilateral triangle of great flexibility, mutuality, and stability. With musicians of the caliber of Buster and Matt, the music is truly wide open and constantly evolving.

8- What interests you most at this moment in your evolution as a musician? Being open to new growth; being more and more present in performance; and remembering to be profoundly grateful to have music in my life.

9 – You're a wine connoisseur. Have a favorite country to drink wine in? You're having a wine party. Three musicians who'd be on the top of your invite list? My wife Josephine and I have been wine collectors since the 60s, and have gone through different phases of "favorite" countries. We have broad tastes, but currently lean more to California and French wine. Buster, Matt, and master drummer George Marsh would be at the top of the invitation list—we've shared some amazing wine adventures on the road and in the studio. They all have great palates and sensibilities.