

Q & A for Marc Myers' Interview with Denny Zeitlin for JazzWax.com April 2017

1. Many people are unaware that your first recording was in 1963 and that Bill Evans was an early supporter. He also recorded your composition, "Quiet Now," many times. What do you remember about your interactions with him?

That 1963 project was Jeremy Steig's "Flute Fever" where I was the featured pianist. Bill Evans called my playing on the album "great" in a Downbeat Blindfold Test, so I felt emboldened to contact him after I finished my first trio LP, "Cathexis," for Columbia in 1964. I hoped for a critique and his perspective on the music scene. Bill was warm and welcoming, listened carefully to the whole album, and was extremely positive about the music. His only suggestion was to keep doing my thing, and to never let anyone tell me what to play. Getting this feedback at age 26 from someone I admired and respected was very important for me. Over the years we would touch base when I had the chance to hear his trio, and his encouragement and generosity of spirit was something I treasured. And I was amazed that he felt such a connection to "Quiet Now" that he recorded it at least 8 times and kept it in his nightly repertoire for 15 years.

2. As you think back on "Quiet Now" what was your inspiration?

I composed "Quite Now" when I was 18 or 19 years old, in college. I can't recall a specific event that inspired it. I do know that it felt like a requiem, and was full of yearning and loss.

3. You're in the process of posting videos on YouTube of "Zeitlin Meets Monk," a recent solo piano concert focusing on his compositions. What drew you to his work, and what do you feel hasn't been said yet in the many tributes that have preceded yours?

I've loved Monk since I first heard him back in 1952 when I entered high school. His utter originality was astounding, yet no matter how quirky his tunes or playing might seem, there was always an uncanny internal logic operating. His passion and risk-taking inspired me, and his compositions were wonderful springboards into improvisation. I feel like we are kindred spirits, and that my explorations of his compositions both honor his genius, and take the music to some new places.

4. Did you ever even meet Monk? If so, what did he think of your piano approach?

I describe my one and only meeting with Monk in the first "Zeitlin Meets Monk" YouTube video. Very briefly, I was introduced to Monk at a jazz club by his drummer Ben Riley in 1964. I

delivered a series of lame compliments while Monk stared into space, and then suddenly turned, exclaimed "Ben Riley!!" and pointed to Ben who had gone to the bar. I knew my audience, such as it was, had come to an end, and I went over the bar. About a year later, I did manage some kind of connection with him when he loved a track from one of my albums in a Downbeat Blindfold Test.

5. What was it like to be a jazz musician in the early 1960s? Were you part of the New York scene?

In some ways, my most formative years were 1952-60 in high school in the Chicago area, and then at the University of Illinois where I would frequently return to Chicago for gigs and jam sessions. In 1960 I began 4 years of medical school at Johns Hopkins in Baltimore which was very demanding academically. I did find time to sit in frequently with Gary Bartz and his group at the North End Lounge, which helped me keep my music developing. And I made my first two recordings for Columbia in NYC during that period, but was never part of the New York scene.

6. You're going to be appearing at Mezzrow in NYC April 19-22, two nights of solo followed by two nights of trio. How are those two formats different for you?

There's something very special about being alone at the piano, with the opportunity and challenge to be solely responsible for the music, which can go absolutely anywhere from moment to moment. And I love being part of the equilateral triangle of a trio with superb players like Buster Williams and Matt Wilson where a merger occurs and a true group music is created.

7. Sunnyside Records recently released your "Early Wayne" tribute to Wayne Shorter. And you're currently sharing your "Zeitlin Meets Monk" videos. Are there other tribute projects in the works? Would you ever consider a focus on Bill Evans?

It's only in the last few years that I've been drawn to the idea of concerts focused solely on the work of one composer. "Remembering Miles" was the theme of a solo concert last December, and I hope it will eventually be released on CD. And next December the focus will be Billy Strayhorn, and there are a number of other composers I'd enjoy exploring, including Bill Evans.