

Denny Zeitlin brings his touch to Miles Davis' music

By Jesse Hamlin

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Photo: Courtesy Denny Zeitlin

Pianist Denny Zeitlin features the music of Miles Davis at his annual solo concert at Piedmont Piano Co. on Friday, Dec. 9.

Performing at the Piedmont Piano Co. is particularly pleasurable for **Denny Zeitlin**, the venerable Bay Area jazz pianist and psychiatrist whose annual solo concerts at the Oakland keyboard emporium have enraptured audiences and produced fine live recordings, like his current one exploring the early music of **Wayne Shorter**.

It was recorded in 2014 at Piedmont Piano, where, by popular demand, a second show has been added on Friday, Dec. 9, when the pianist brings his improvisational gifts and crystalline touch to **Miles Davis**' music.

Earlier this week, Zeitlin had the luxury of strolling into the showroom "to try four different 9-foot concert grands, to see which one speaks to me," he says.

"They maintain these instruments impeccably, tuning them before the concert and in between the first and second sets. It's marvelous. You couldn't ask for more attention, expertise or a better atmosphere."

That atmosphere has to do with acoustics of the room and the vibe of the patrons.

The pianos are arrayed asymmetrically in a way that breaks up what's called the standing-wave phenomenon. That's when sound waves moving in opposite directions — like the ones in a box-shaped hall that bounce off the back wall — collide, "accentuating certain frequencies that distort the purity and balance of the sound," he explains.

At Piedmont Piano, "there's no distortion, and the acoustics are exquisite," Zeitlin adds. The audiences "have the feeling of a big family of people who love music and are very open to exploring music together."

"Over the years, I've had the privilege to play at big venues and festivals, in front of 20,000 people. But there's a faceless aspect to the audience in that setting. I really prefer to play in a place where I can see people and they can see me and see what's going on at the piano. It feels like we're all in it together. That intimacy is very special."

A prominent jazz player since the 1960s, Zeitlin, who composed the electro-acoustic score to **Phil Kaufman**'s 1978 remake of "**Invasion of the Body Snatchers**," is a vital 78-year-old who still runs up Mount Tamalpais, teaches in the clinical psychiatry department at UCSF and maintains a private practice.

On Friday, he'll play a range of music associated with Davis, a major influence on him and countless others.

Over the decades, "listening to what this visionary was into was galvanizing," Zeitlin says of Davis. "What he did in terms conceptualizing how music would evolve and change. ... Miles had this ability to fiercely reinvent himself. He would not allow himself to go back to where he'd been."

Among other tunes — including “**Milestones**,” “**Flamenco Sketches**” from the classic “**Kind of Blue**” album and “**So Near, So Far**” from 1963’s “**Seven Steps to Heaven**” — Zeitlin will dig into “**Time After Time**,” the **Cyndi Lauper** pop hit Davis memorably recorded in the ’80s.

He’s also improvising on “**Circle**,” one of the modal numbers Davis’ second great quartet recorded on the 1967 record “**Miles Smiles**.”

“It’s a particularly intriguing composition, because it has an unusual number of bars and because of the ending,” Zeitlin says. “It’s as if the player enters a roundabout, and there are four or five ramps you can take that eventually lead back to the top of the tune. There are any number of possibilities, and I hope I’m going to surprise myself.”

For more information, go to www.piedmontpiano.com.