

IN PERFORMANCE



Hiroyuki Ito for The New York Times

The jazz pianist Denny Zeitlin in a rare appearance in New York.

JAZZ

Playful Improvisation From a Brainy Piano Man

*Denny Zeitlin
Jazz Standard*

Denny Zeitlin has long been a favorite of the jazz-piano cognoscenti, partly because his individual style and his approach to the piano trio put him in a similar ballpark with Bill Evans and Keith Jarrett: he is in an exclusive circle of thinking man's pianists. But he is also admired, one must assume, for his unusual career path: he has long balanced music with a psychiatric practice in the Bay Area and he has composed for films ("Invasion of the Body Snatchers") and television.

He has a new album out ("As Long As There's Music," on 32 Jazz), and he paid a rare visit to New York last weekend, playing with the bassist Buster Williams and the drummer Al Foster. The first thing noticeable in one of Mr. Zeitlin's Friday night sets was his eagerness and agility. For someone who doesn't do this full time, he has impressive chops. Then one gets the feeling of watching a

highly specialized operation: a focused, intellectual exercise in reharmonizing old tunes and presenting new ones that begin from a more radical position.

Lennie Tristano was a detectable influence in a version of John Coltrane's "Mr. P.C.," in which Mr. Zeitlin improvised with the right hand alone, playing long single-note lines, dry and declarative. At other times he performed parallel improvisations with both hands an octave apart. He was dynamic, rocketing out of chords with extended lines that sailed across the keyboard and touched down right on the first beat of a bar.

In his own piece "Slick Rock" he showed a wide experimental streak. He began playing with fingers and mallets inside the piano, then used striking dissonances in a six-beat rhythm, a little reminiscent of Horace Tapscott, with unmetred sections and dark *idées fixes*...in the most outré moments of the set, especially in Mr. Zeitlin's harmonies, there was a sense of play, creativity and boldness; one felt the power of improvisation as a skill and as an almost philosophical endeavor.

BEN RATLIFF

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