

REFLECTIONS ON DENNY ZEITLIN

Spike Wilner

Smalls-Mezzrow Newsletter April 24, 2017

Dear Friends:

The first time I heard the album “Cathexis” by pianist Denny Zeitlin it hit me like a ton of bricks - I was dumbfounded. The modernity of it made me think it was some younger cat that I hadn’t heard yet - the next new genius. But this was recorded in 1964, before Herbie Hancock’s “Maiden Voyage”, before Keith Jarrett’s work. Startling in its originality and openness - so free and yet still with an enormous jazz feeling. Way, way ahead of its time - visionary jazz conception. Where was this guy now? I endeavored to bring Denny Zeitlin to Mezzrow, if it were possible.

I sent Denny a message on Facebook, which to my surprise, he responded. We began a phone correspondence and I won his trust. Denny is a meticulous man and made some calls to see if I was “on the level”. It’s gratifying to know that I have a strong reputation in this business. Denny agreed to come and play at Mezzrow for four nights, two as a solo piano and two with his trio featuring Buster Williams and Matt Wilson. I greeted Denny and his wife when they arrived in New York and helped them get settled into their room. Now 79 years old, Denny is a lanky guy with a white beard and a persuasive gentleness about him but nonetheless authoritative. Denny has a lengthy and prestigious career (still active) as a psychiatrist. As Denny explained to me, he “loved medicine as much as he loved music and didn’t want to lose one to the other.” By having a career as a doctor, he was free to develop his music unimpeded by the brutally meager living that a career musician must face. It also kept him healthy, unlike many of his peers who lived their lives continuously in clubs and bars.

The name Denny Zeitlin is not as famous as some of his peer group such as Herbie Hancock and McCoy Tyner, but Denny’s playing is on that level. The two nights of solo piano impacted me particularly. Denny has a way of improvising harmonies freely, changing the colors and swirling them around any way he wishes. His hands are evenly matched and often improvising together in contrapuntal weaves of phrases. His rhythmic time is flawless and Denny can play tempos breakneck fast or slow without stress. His love for Wayne Shorter yielded some breathtaking re-transformations into his own completely original, organic improvisation. Many pianists were in the house to hear his message and most left dazed, rethinking their own conceptions somewhat.

I reflected on the rarity of an artist given the opportunity to continuously develop from their youth into their middle age and then onward into their late seventies unimpeded. Denny has never stopped practicing or thinking about music and has been left unfettered to grow continuously. Like my own dearly departed teacher, Harry Whitaker, he’s a like a great tree in the forest that has just grown and grown and grown - becoming something organically

special and beautiful. The ultimate freedom and maturity coming after a full life of growth. So special. I urged Denny to return to New York more often. I reminded him that the community of musicians here needed him. True masters are exceedingly rare, especially in this modern day. We need someone to inspire and motivate us. Someone to help us rise out of complacency and to remind us that the journey to originality is a long one.

Regards,

Spike