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Jazz CDs: Denny Zeitlin

“Denny Zeitlin: The Columbia Studio Trio Sessions” (Mosaic Select)

“Denny Zeitlin Trio In Concert” (Sunnyside)

By Don Heckman

The rub on writing about Denny Zeitlin has always been his unlikely dual career track - as a working jazz musician and a teaching and practicing psychiatrist. The immediate temptation, frequently succumbed to, is to search for the subtle (and not so subtle) linkages between psychotherapy and improvisation. But that gets old fast. And, taking a contrary view, it may well be that Zeitlin’s enormous potential as a jazz artist has, in fact, been dimmed somewhat by the difficulty of getting away from patients and classrooms long enough to maintain a regular schedule of live performances, recordings, and all the other minutiae that are vital to international jazz visibility.

What’s most remarkable about Zeitlin, however, is how successful he has been at reaching into the deepest reaches of his creativity, despite the academic and clinical demands on his attention. And these two recent releases—which serendipitously reveal the seemingly boundary-less aspects of his art—underscore the remarkable aspects of what could have been, and what has been.

The Mosaic releases includes three studio albums Zeitlin recorded for Columbia in the ’60s: “Cathexis” (March, 1964), “Carnival” (October, 1964) and “Zeitgeist” (1966 and 1967), as well as an hour of previously unissued material. “Denny Zeitlin Trio In Concert” takes a forty year leap, chronicling live performances with bassist Buster Williams and drummer Matt Wilson, recorded at the Jazz Bakery and the Outpost Performance Space in Albuquerque between 2001 and 2006.

The Columbia sessions, recorded at a time when the jazz world was flaming with new ideas, reveal a remarkably assured improvisational mind at work. Still in his ’20s, working on a medical degree at the same time, Zeitlin nonetheless had an astonishingly mature grasp of his creative goals. Well aware of the diverse currents coursing through the music—via the work of Ornette Coleman, John Coltrane, George Russell, Cecil Taylor, Charles Mingus, Don Ellis, Miles Davis, among many others—Zeitlin steered his own steady creative course. Taking what he could use from his surroundings, filtering

ideas through his own creative prism, he produced a set of performances that have been sitting on the shelves, unavailable on CD for far too long.

There is, first of all, his prodigious technical ability. But, unlike many of the current fast-fingered young players, Zeitlin's virtuosity was completely at the service of an expansive musical imagination. Stunningly fleet bebop figures are juxtaposed against thick chordal clusters; tone-rich lyrical lines alternate with roving bass lines and two-handed, harmonic tsunamis; jaunty, blues and funk-driven melodies are contrasted by occasional forays across the piano strings. All of it pulling the listener into musical territories which, despite their utter sense of newness, continue to resonate with echoes of jazz familiarity.

Originals such as "Carnival," "Little Children, Don't Go Near That House," "The Bells of Solitude," "Dormammu" and the multi-part "Blue Phoenix" and "Mirage" reach well beyond the characteristic theme-and-improvisations jazz pattern, into fascinating areas of composition, improvisation and expressionistic idea-making.

Zeitlin's take on standards is equally, if differently, fascinating. Blessed with vivid harmonic intuition, he transforms such familiar items as "I Got Rhythm," "We'll Be Together Again," "Night and Day" and "Here's That Rainy Day" into startling inspirations, as magically transformative of the originals as a Faberge egg is of its original source of reference. On "The Boy Next Door," he playfully devotes most of his interpretation to the verse, before climaxing with the song's chorus. And the often-performed "All The Things You Are" becomes a tone poem, infused with rich, multi-hued cross-currents of harmony and melody.

The new, in-concert CD, like the Mosaic package, has been released in celebration of Zeitlin's 70th birthday. And what it reveals is the inexorable continuity of his music. Here, too, there is a pair of extended works—"Mr. P.C." (based on the John Coltrane line), "The Night Has 1000 Eyes/10,000 Eyes" (positioning the old standard against a Zeitlin original), as well as a similarly episodic juxtaposition of Zeitlin's "The We Of Us" with Cole Porter's "All of You." And, once again, Zeitlin's improvisations find the sensitivity in virtuosity, the playfulness in emotional intensity, the swing in spontaneity—the product of a career arc spanning more than four decades of brilliant, still too little recognized, musical creativity..

It's also worth keeping in mind that Zeitlin had a period in the '70s, during which he embarked on a range of musical experimentation combining various electronic and acoustic media with rock, classical, pop, jazz and avant-garde techniques, before returning to his familiar acoustic, piano trio environment in the '80s. Much of that music has been too rarely heard, as well. And one wonders what it will take to produce a full career overview of the work of this adventurous, extraordinarily gifted artist.