

ST. PAUL, MINNESOTA

MUSIC REVIEW

Zeitlin takes 3 to tango

BY DAN EMERSON

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After years of evolving jazz styles, bringing something fresh and innovative to the extra-familiar trio configuration requires no small amount of creativity and willingness to take risks — qualities that veteran pianist Denny Zeitlin, bassist Buster Williams and drummer Matt Wilson showed plenty of Monday night at the Dakota Jazz Club.

The 66-year-old Zeitlin was making his first appearance in the Twin Cities since 1974. Now in his 70s, Williams is one of the great elder statesmen of acoustic bass, with a savvy and gravitas that come from years of accompanying a long list of jazz hall of famers. Roughly four decades younger than Williams, Wilson is considered one of the young trailblazers of 21st-century jazz drumming.

IF YOU GO

Where: Dakota Jazz Club,
1010 Nicollet Mall,
Minneapolis

Tickets: \$22 (early)
\$17 (late)

Information: 612-332-1010

Capsule: Making his first local appearance in 30 years, pianist Denny Zeitlin and his group update the familiar trio format.

As Zeitlin commented before the set, he relishes playing with Williams and Wilson because both are great listeners — able to anticipate the melodic, rhythmic and harmonic permutations Zeitlin uses to constantly reconfigure tunes he has played many times before.

Zeitlin showed his bent for inventive improvisation right from the opening notes, taking the often-heard jazz standard “All of You” through some tricky detours while only relying on the written melody and chord changes to define the tune. Zeitlin likes to take the musical equivalent of the scenic route, concocting elaborate flurries of notes, mixing in unexpected pauses and accelerating runs to make the connections between chords.

While much of Zeitlin’s playing tends to be ruminative and rhythmically relaxed, the trio cranked up the energy level with a driving version of saxophonist Wayne Shorter’s “E.S.P.”

Monday’s most unconventional and interesting number was the title piece from Zeitlin’s newly released MaxJazz CD, “Slickrock.” It’s an impressionistic, four-part suite that evokes the sights and moods of a day Zeitlin spent mountain biking the craggy slopes of Moab, Utah.

Dan Emerson is a freelance writer and musician in Minneapolis.