

MUSIC

DENNY ZEITLIN

The Keyboard Whiz Who Leads Two Lives

BY DON ASHER

THEY USED to be called "double threats" — people with uncommon ability in two usually unrelated fields. When pianist Denny Zeitlin, a graduate of the University of Illinois (Phi Beta Kappa) and Johns Hopkins Medical School, was completing his psychiatric residency at San Francisco's Langley Porter Institute in the mid-'60s, he had already attained the upper ranks of modern jazz piano with a series of acclaimed acoustic trio LPs for Columbia Records.

At the close of the decade he would turn "outside," as musicians say, pioneering in the integration of jazz, rock, funk, classical, electronic, and free-form elements.

"It was before the word 'fusion' became popular," he recalls. "In those days you couldn't walk into your corner grocery and come out with a Moog synthesizer under your arm."

When I first saw him perform in 1972 at the San Francisco Conservatory of Music, with drummer George Marsh and bassist Mel Graves, he was walled in by five keyboards and an intimidating array of switches, foot pedals, synthesizers, consoles, and electronic boxes. I thought at the time that if wings had sprouted and engines been installed, the entire complex might have levitated.

The space-age trio produced a kalei-

Denny Zeitlin appears with Charlie Haden and Peter Donald Friday and Saturday at Kimball's, 300 Grove Street in San Francisco.

doscopic range of sound spanning the light years between early mainstream jazz (but in a capricious groove, something humorous and surreal flickering on the edges) and the outer frontiers of bop, rock, and classical impressionism. Record companies respected the talent and vision involved, but saw no way to market the product.

Zeitlin created his own mail-order record label, Double Helix, and cut the seminal album, "Expansion." The first

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pressing sold out; to Zeitlin's relief, 1750 Arch Records, a prestigious Berkeley company, then took over the administration.

Six years of concertizing and recording in this multi-dimensional, multi-keyboard vein followed. At the same time, he was conducting a private practice in psychiatry and teaching at the University of California.

"From the beginning the media had an overwhelming desire to sensationalize the fact that I was involved in two different careers. For the 'Cathexis' album cover a young eager beaver at Columbia thought it would be a clever idea to sit

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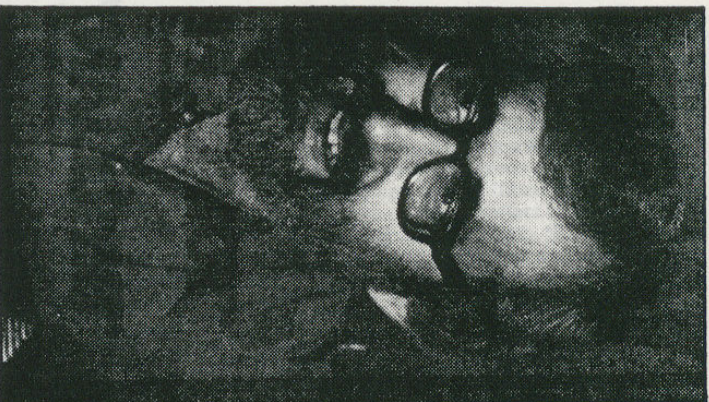
me at the piano dressed in surgeon's gown, mask, and gloves. A Down Beat ad for the 'Live at the Trident' album read, 'Kick that sad bag. Pull up a couch and dig Mr. Denny Zeitlin.' It made me cringe. The illustration for the ad was a Rorschach of my face."

In 1978 he was asked to write and perform the musical score for "Invasion of the Body Snatchers." The film was a major success, and Zeitlin's work won accolades all around. New Yorker critic Pauline Kael called the score "dazzling." Zeitlin considers the project the biggest challenge of his musical career.

"I had to write for a 60-piece symphony orchestra and perform two-thirds of the score personally, using various electronic instruments and prepared piano techniques. It was a commitment of many months and involved learning the whole technology of film music."

In the wake of this experience — other offers from Hollywood were refused because of the massive demands on his time — came a yearning to return to the simplicity of the acoustic piano, his first instrument and the "bedrock" of his music.

"For years I had spent up to six hours tearing down my studio, supervis-



Denny Zeitlin, psychiatrist and jazzman

ing the loading of components onto a truck, then setting up again. After the concert the whole process had to be re-

peated; it got tiring. When I returned to the acoustic I expected I'd be rusty — that my technique and approach would have suffered from having the instrument buried among all those synthesizers and electronic keyboards. Instead I found my scope had broadened immensely. There were sounds coming out of the piano I had never played before."

Today his career, infused with fresh ideas and a prodigious vitality, is flourishing as never before. A highlight of last year's "Jazz at the Opera House" concert, produced by the late Chronicle critic, Conrad Silveri, was a surprising duet with pianist Herbie Hancock: the performance was recorded by CBS and recently released. Two other albums have come out this year: "Bill Evans — A Tribute" (Palo Alto Records) which features Zeitlin among a pantheon of pianists Evans particularly admired, and "Time Re-members One Time Once" (ECM/Polygram), a duo album with superb bassist Charlie Haden, who will be joining him, along with drummer Peter Donald, for an engagement at Kimball's Friday and Saturday. The duo format intrigues Zeitlin:

"There's a purity, a transparency of chamber music in the experience. Ideally there's the mutual challenge of creating something new, but also a mutual respect and trust without a debilitating kind of competition. This allows you to take risks and move into new musical territory."

Appearances are set for the San Diego Jazz Festival in July, followed by Los Angeles and New York club dates, a tour of East Coast colleges and a fall European solo-piano concert tour which will kick off with a performance at the Berlin

Jazz Festival. Zeitlin was recently asked to join the "Rhodes Scholars," an elite corps of keyboard artists (Chick Corea, Herbie Hancock, Joe Zawinul, et al.) who are provided with CBS-Rhodes musical equipment in exchange for their critical evaluation and endorsement of the products.

The electric music studio has remained very much alive in his Kentfield home, and in the past few months the pendulum has swung again: He has felt a pull back toward incorporating the electronic instruments in some of his future recordings and concerts.

Meanwhile he continues with his teaching schedule at the University of California and a full-time private psychiatric practice at his San Francisco and Marin offices, focusing on intensive outpatient psychotherapy with individuals, couples and groups.

A half-hour television documentary on Zeitlin's busy days and nights is slated for PBS. As to the question often posed of two lives at cross-purposes, the potential for dual careers' colliding:

"In many ways these fields are very different, and that has been refreshing for me over the years. I can't imagine myself involved in only one. Each activity seems to provide new energy and enthusiasm for the other. But at the core there are striking similarities, which probably explains why I gravitated so strongly to the two fields. Both involve tuning into one's inner depths while profoundly listening — to the music, the musicians, to the patients who are exploring their psychological lives in my office. The nature of that empathy and communication is extraordinarily rewarding." ■