

The Boston Globe

August 27, 2006

JAZZ

A pianist and a psychiatrist, he links music and the mind

By Andrew Gilbert, Globe Correspondent

SAN FRANCISCO -- Denny Zeitlin is in the intuition business. He's found his calling in two very different professions, but whether he's guiding patients in his psychiatric practice or radically reinventing standards on the piano with his jazz trio, Zeitlin seeks a similar state of selfless communion.

As a therapist, he sees his role as an accompanist who supports his patients "to help them tell their stories in the richest, most clear way possible," says Zeitlin, 68, who makes his Boston debut Tuesday with his trio at Scullers. It features bass virtuoso Buster Williams and the supremely inventive drummer Matt Wilson.

Sitting behind the piano, Zeitlin moves to the foreground to tell his own tales. In both cases he's reaching for a rarefied state of mind where instinct and training mysteriously merge.

"Whether I'm working with a patient or I'm playing music I see a big part of my job as being able to enter a kind of ecstatic state, not in the sense that it's always joyful, but ecstasy in the original Greek sense of being outside of oneself," Zeitlin says during an interview.

Over the years Zeitlin has formed a number of musical relationships that exemplify the ecstatic communion attained by the greatest improvisers. Some of his earliest albums feature his breathtaking interplay with bassist Charlie Haden and drummer Jerry Granelli. Unfortunately, of Zeitlin's four John Hammond-produced Columbia releases, only his astonishing 1964 debut, "Cathexis," has been released on CD in its entirety in the United States.

In the 1980s, Zeitlin forged an exceptional partnership with bassist Dave Friesen, a collaboration documented on the (out of print) Windham Hill album "In the Moment" and an eponymous 1995 duo CD for Concord Jazz. Since hooking up with Williams and Wilson about five years ago, Zeitlin is once again at the center of a state-of-the-art trio.

The band's 2004 album for MaxJazz, "SlickRock," was one of the year's most satisfying releases, with a blend of reimagined American Songbook classics ("You and the Night and the Music"), jazz standards (Wayne Shorter's "E.S.P."), and Zeitlin's originals,

including the title suite, which was inspired by his adventures mountain biking with his wife in Utah's Canyonlands National Park.

The group started taking shape when Zeitlin was preparing to make an album for the Japanese label Venus and he recalled his longtime desire to play with Williams, whom he first became aware of through Herbie Hancock's 1969 Blue Note album "The Prisoner." "Buster has this bottomless sound," Zeitlin says. "The feeling of pulse in every note is just right, and his harmonic anticipation is wonderful."

Wilson came on board through the recommendation of several colleagues, who guessed that his sense of swing would mesh perfectly with Zeitlin. "Matt is uncanny," Zeitlin says. "He's always in the right place at the right time doing the right thing. It's hard to think of any drummer who has that kind of radar."

The musicians describe having as much fun hanging out together after gigs as they do playing together, noting that they all share a love of fine wines. For Wilson in particular, who at 41 is by far the junior member of the ensemble, working with two veterans he's long revered is a dream gig.

"What I love about it is they seek out the adventure," Wilson says. "Buster's groove is so deep, and Denny gets such beautiful colors out of the piano. I feel like he wants it to be a collective conversation, and the sets can unfold like one long improvisation."

On both the nature and the nurture side, Zeitlin had a head start as a doctor and a musician. His father was a radiologist and enthusiastic, untrained pianist. His mother was a speech pathologist and capable classical pianist. Zeitlin started studying piano and classical music at 7, and by his early teens had become entranced by jazz. Growing up in a suburb of Chicago, he began gravitating toward the city's thriving jazz scene, finding mentors like the great multi-instrumentalist Ira Sullivan.

Even during medical school at Johns Hopkins, Zeitlin managed to spend a fair amount of time jamming with future jazz stars Gary Bartz and Billy Hart. Starting in the late '60s, he spent a decade immersing himself in cutting-edge electronic music, a period that culminated in his acclaimed score for Philip Kaufman's 1978 remake of "Invasion of the Body Snatchers." On his latest album, "Solo Voyage" (MaxJazz), he's again starting to explore electronics. While it's impossible to judge whether Zeitlin's career as a jazz musician has made him a better psychiatrist, it's hard not to feel the depth of communication he attains with his bandmates stems partly from his skill in sounding the mind and soul.

It all comes back to ecstasy. "With a patient that means being able to enter into their world well enough to feel what they're feeling, remembering, and dreaming," Zeitlin says. "If I'm on the stage with other musicians, it means feeling as though the music is coming through us, so that I'm not forcibly manipulating it and just allowing it to occur."

© Copyright 2006 Globe Newspaper Company.