

San Jose Mercury News 'Doctor Jazz' finds time for two challenging careers

By Richard Scheinin

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Denny Zeitlin, working in his home studio.
[Credit: Josephine Zeitlin]

KENTFIELD -- In 1965, Newsweek magazine ran a story about Denny Zeitlin titled "Doctor Jazz," describing the then 27-year-old polymath as "the man with the benignly split personality."

Now 45 years have passed, and the 72-year-old who sits at his kitchen table in Marin, nibbling on wife Josephine's home-baked cookies, is still "benignly split" between two careers. Tall and wiry (he runs 90 minutes every other day on nearby Mount Tamalpais), Zeitlin is an eager and eloquent talker about the twin engines of his life: jazz piano (he is among the jazz world's super-fine players) and psychiatry (he has a full-time private practice and is a clinical professor at the University of California San Francisco).

He has two new albums on the Sunnyside label, one with his trio ("In Concert"), one solo ("Precipice"), and is preparing for his next performance, Saturday at the Piedmont Piano Company in Oakland, where he will sit down at a 1908 Steinway grand and shoot for the stars, alone. Even after all these years, solo playing is both "liberating" and a "potentially terrifying experience," he says. "You're there, naked, and trying to allow yourself to pull out something new. There's no one around to bail you out if you fall off the wire."

Not that he's likely to fall.

Since 1963, when Columbia Records producer John Hammond -- the same talent scout who signed Billie Holiday, Bob Dylan and Bruce Springsteen -- recruited Zeitlin to the label, his music has shined with a special brand of virtuosity, equal parts brain and heart.

A musician's musician -- Billy Taylor, bebop pianist and broadcaster, once profiled him on the CBS Morning News -- Zeitlin talks about music in terms of "balance" and "natural complexity." He uses the same terms to describe fine wines; since the mid-'60s, he and Josephine have been avid wine collectors and own an extensive collection.

Likewise, Zeitlin's aesthetic philosophy embraces a "let's see where this is going" streak of improvisation, and not only in music. From the early 1970s until six or seven years ago, he and Josephine were devoted mountain bikers, taking on the steep, stone-stepped trails of Canyonlands National Park in Moab, Utah. "Slick Rock" became the name of an album.

A man with an appetite for living -- a "zest" inherited from his parents, he says -- Zeitlin's musical fame might have been greater had he not chosen a second, equally difficult career. Because staying on top of his patient load is a must, he has never lived on the road like so many of his colleagues. Still, he's managed the occasional international tour, recorded more than 30 albums and twice placed first in the Downbeat International Jazz Critics Poll. He has composed music for "Sesame Street" and scored the 1978 film remake of "Invasion of the Body Snatchers."

A typical Zeitlin day might begin at the piano in his living room, followed by appointments with patients in his home office, then a run on Mount Tam, a drive to San Francisco to see more patients, and, finally, more piano at night. Each activity "enlivens" him and feeds the next.

"I've always thought that they were cross-pollinating," he says of his careers. "What's at the core of each is the importance of the deepest kind of communication and empathy. When I'm doing my best work as a psychotherapist, I find that I'm able to voluntarily set aside my self-boundaries and enter into the psychological world of my patients."

In the psychiatric literature, this is known as the merger state. Such a state can also happen in a couple's intimate relationships, as self-boundaries dissolve: spiritually, physically. When music is most alive on a bandstand, the merger state -- many musicians call it "the zone" -- happens there, too.

"I lose the positional sense of myself: of me, sitting at the piano, putting my fingers on the keyboard," Zeitlin explains. "All of a sudden, it's just music happening, and 'isn't this interesting and where is it going to go?' We all become the audience."

The creative spark has been lit.

Zeitlin has lectured widely on capturing the creative impulse. In fact, you can watch him lecture about it to medical colleagues in a video clip on his Web site (www.dennyzeitlin.com). The site explores his psychiatry, his wine collecting (watch him taste and describe seven Chateau Latour vintages), mountain biking, fly fishing, and, of course, his music, with an archive of news stories going back to his teen years.

He grew up outside Chicago, the son of Nathaniel Zeitlin, a radiologist, and Rosalyn Zeitlin, a speech pathologist with a masters degree in dance and "amazing interpersonal radar."

Both played some piano, and, starting at age two, Denny would crawl onto their laps and experiment at the family keyboard. Classical studies started at age 6 or 7, around the same time he met a psychiatrist uncle, who fascinated him. Before long, Denny was "practicing psychotherapy on the playground, without a license," he jokes. "Kids told me their stories."

Then, around eighth grade, Zeitlin first heard jazz: an LP by pianist George Shearing. "It was just galvanizing for me," he says. "It's what I was waiting for my whole life."

When he was 15, he began driving to Chicago, hanging out all night in clubs -- literally hanging on every chord, asking the best pianists to explain secret chord voicings. Among the players passing through town was Billy Taylor, a New Yorker who would bring his trio to a club called the Streamliner. He became a mentor to Zeitlin, even visited the Zeitlin home in the suburbs, where Rosalyn gave the travelers a home-cooked meal. Denny's trio played for Taylor, and Taylor's trio returned the favor.

Taylor also warned young Zeitlin about life on the road, with the attendant difficulties of maintaining a marriage. "It made an impression on me," notes Zeitlin, who went off to the University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign as a pre-med major.

And now his double-life began: Zeitlin was thick into the local jazz scene, which included guitarist Wes Montgomery, saxophonist Joe Farrell (then, Joe Firrantello) and pianist Roger Kellaway, then playing a lot of bass. On weekends, Zeitlin would zip back to Chicago to jam with the likes of saxophonist Johnny Griffin and trumpeter-saxophonist Ira Sullivan, legends.

Graduating in 1960, he advanced to the Johns Hopkins University School of Medicine in Baltimore. Luckily, there was a 7-foot Steinway in the medical residence hall. Zeitlin played between lectures. At night, he sat in at the North End Lounge, a popular club of the time, with heavy up-and-comers: saxophonist Gary Bartz, drummer Billy Hart.

Finally Zeitlin arrived in San Francisco, in 1964, first for his internship at San Francisco General Hospital, then for his psychiatric residency at UCSF. Others have written memoirs about the crippling hours required for such medical training; Zeitlin's response was to grab a regular Monday night spot for his trio at the Trident club in Sausalito, where he recorded a live album for Columbia -- and met Josephine Shady, a San Jose State psychology major who went on to become a high-end cook, landscape designer and independent film actress.

Call it the creative impulse at work, all in one family. And, no, Zeitlin isn't disappointed that the responsibilities of his double-tracked career may have reduced his chances of reaching the top - - fame-wise, at least -- in either. "I've certainly had momentary pangs," he admits, "but they last only a few seconds, because I'm so grateful that I've had the opportunity to practice both fields. I'm still as fascinated by psychiatry and music as I ever was, and I see myself as a perpetual student, able to grow."

To have been denied one field or the other? Zeitlin groans at the very thought of it: "Ooooooh. I certainly could have potentially been much more well-known in either field, if I had pursued one or the other in a mono-maniacal fashion. But I would've been terribly unhappy."

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