

The Merger State



Whether treating patients or treating audiences to a great performance, this psychiatrist and jazz musician seeks a deep kind of communication.

By David McKay Wilson

Opening photo by Josephine Zeitlin

Denny Zeitlin, Med '64, makes his way through the New York Hilton lobby. He wheels behind him a small black suitcase packed with dozens of CDs and a stack of flyers promoting his workshop, "Unlocking the Creative Impulse: The Psychology of Improvisation." A veteran jazz pianist, he has come to the International Association of Jazz Educators to teach his workshop, mingle with musician friends, and, he hopes, to find a distributor for his latest CD, a compilation of standards and original compositions he recorded with bassist Buster Williams and drummer Matt Wilson.

That last goal shouldn't be too hard. Zeitlin is a renowned jazz pianist and composer with more than 30 albums to his credit. He plays dozens of shows each year at clubs and at major festivals across the United States, Europe, and Japan. He has composed music for *Sesame Street* and wrote the symphonic score for the 1978 film *Invasion of the Body Snatchers*. Critics have applauded his broad range — from his delicate touch with contemplative ballads to the cascades of notes in his hard-driving improvisations — and he has twice won *Downbeat Magazine's* international jazz critics poll.

But if it doesn't work out — well, he always has a successful career as a psychiatrist to fall back on. "I'm grateful I don't have to make a living" as a musician, Zeitlin says. "It can be so precarious."

Plenty of doctors take up an instrument and play in amateur ensembles as a release

from the stress of practicing medicine. But what Zeitlin has done is far more rare. He has made simultaneous lifelong professions of both vocations — and successful professions at that.

"When you look at the two activities, they seem so different, yet at the very core of both is the deepest form of communication," Zeitlin says. "In both cases, you end up being in the profoundest communication and attunement with people. When I'm with individuals in therapy, my job is to enter a kind of merger state with those people and their psychological lives so I can feel my way into the deepest levels of their experience, to see how I can help.

"When I'm playing my best music," he continues, "I enter that merger state, and there are moments, and even minutes, when I lose the positional sense of myself. It's just pure music happening. I'm awash in sounds. I'm not sure who is making those sounds. We are just a conduit for the music coming through all of us."

Zeitlin lives in the Marin County, California, town of Kentfield, with his wife, Josephine, a garden designer who has also acted in 20 films. The ground floor of their hillside home showcases the multiple interests of the person the *Los Angeles Times* has called "the jazz world's most visible Renaissance man." There's a music studio with a Steinway piano, synthesizer, and mixing board where he has recorded several albums. Next door is his cozy office where he sees patients in his private practice. Down the hall is his climate-controlled wine cellar with more than 4,000 bottles. There's also storage for his mountain bike and fly-fishing gear. In 2006, he launched a Web site that highlights his eclecticism, with samples of his songs and a scrapbook of his multifaceted professional life — plus a guided tour of his wine cellar and a video starring his exotic collection of cats and dogs. (Visit www.dennyzeitlin.com to see him rolling around on the floor in leather pants, playing with Vivace and Glissando, a pair of Cirneco dell' Etna dogs, from the group of breeds that includes greyhounds, whippets, and salukis.)

His dual careers started early. The son of medical professionals who played the piano — his mother was a speech pathologist and his father a radiologist — Zeitlin grew up in suburban Chicago with both a love of music and an interest in listening to his friends' problems. He says he was fascinated by a psychiatrist uncle, who would explain to his inquisitive nephew how patients would talk to him about their problems, and how he'd help them feel better by listening and understanding. By third grade, Zeitlin says, he was "practicing without a license" at recess. "Kids would come up to me and talk about their problems. The experience of being trusted in that way was precious to me."

He first began to play the piano at age 2, sitting on his mother's lap, placing his hands over hers to feel the movement and rhythm. He began formal musical studies at 7, and by high school, Zeitlin had become a big fan of jazz. This was the early 1950s. Big bands were popular, and be-bop was developing in the clubs of Chicago's South Side. Zeitlin's parents encouraged him to play and regularly gave him the keys to the car so he could listen and play at clubs like the Beehive and the French Poodle. They trusted him to steer clear of the booze and drugs, and he did so. Some nights, the teenager would stay at the clubs all night, coming home as the sun rose.

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Zeitlin's college years were filled with academic rigor and opportunities to perform. At the University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign, he earned a degree in philosophy and premedical studies while finding time to jam at Chicago clubs with jazz legends like tenor saxophonist Johnny Griffin and guitarist Wes Montgomery. By the time he came to John Hopkins for **medical school**, Zeitlin's heart was set on a career in medicine, but he didn't want to abandon music. Between classes, he'd play on the Steinway in the foyer of the medical residence hall. Then he discovered the North End Lounge, a club owned by the father of a young alto sax player named Gary Bartz. Zeitlin would study his anatomy and biochemistry texts until midnight, then head out to the club to play with Bartz and drummer Billy Hart, who have both gone on to become leading jazz artists.

"That was one of the wonderful aspects of Hopkins — the quality of education and the access to music, which was so vital to me," Zeitlin says. "For all four years, I'd go sit in with those cats."

In 1963, Zeitlin's musical career took off. He was on a 10-week psychiatric fellowship at Columbia University when saxophonist Paul Winter introduced him to John Hammond, the famous producer with Columbia Records. Hammond heard him play and invited him to record. For several weekends, Zeitlin would pack his medical books and music charts for the train ride to Manhattan to record *Jeremy Steig: Flute Fever*, an album by a well-known jazz flutist. A year later — amid a yearlong internship at the Langeley Porter Psychiatric Institute at the University of California — San Francisco (UCSF) — he was back as the bandleader on an album called *Cathexis*, with bassist Cecil McBee and drummer Freddy Waits.

"We arranged it on weekends well in advance," recalls Zeitlin. "The 30th Street Studio had this amazing sound. It was a first-class experience for me."

Zeitlin completed his medical residency at Langeley Porter and built a private psychiatric practice in the San Francisco area. Over the past three decades, he has established a reputation as an empathic therapist to his patients and as an accessible professor to his students at the UCSF, where he is on the faculty. "This work with my patients never gets old," Zeitlin says. "I look forward to seeing them and am filled with the work we are doing."

In September, the Denny Zeitlin Trio played a four-night stand at New York's Iridium Jazz Club, where the group showed off its eclectic capabilities. Their playing ranged from tender ballads like "Body and Soul," which Zeitlin performed at his lyrical best, to the complex title track of his 2004 MaxJazz recording, *Slickrock*, with its long meditative passages and tumultuous improvisation that pushed it toward free jazz.

Drummer Matt Wilson describes being on stage with Zeitlin: "He's very thoughtful and methodical, so the structures are clear, and our improvisations have gone everywhere. When we are playing, I know a whole new world is going to open up."

Zeitlin continues to compose music and book new gigs for the trio. At 69, he remains trim and fit. He runs regularly for up to an hour in the hills of Mt. Tamalpais, and rides trails on his custom mountain bike, armored against falls with wrist braces and elbow pads. He does not think about retirement. His father practiced radiology until he was 94. "I'm active, I have high energy, and I still feel

like I'm 19," Zeitlin says. "I savor each day, recognizing that the clock is ticking."

In his "Psychology of Improvisation" lecture-demonstration, Zeitlin uses jazz improvisation as a model, to invite his audience into psychological terrain where the deepest level of creativity can be experienced. He describes the jazz musician's challenge as integrating the Western traditions of virtuosity and intellectual appreciation with an Eastern ecstatic tradition that focuses on being fully present. "The goal," he says, "is to bring the two traditions together in the creative moment, and ignite a spark."

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