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A Psychiatrist's Alter Ego: Noted Jazzman

By DOUG RAMSEY

In October 1963, a 25-year-old Johns Hopkins medical student sat at a concert grand piano in the East 30th Street studio of Columbia Records in New York and played a masterpiece of a jazz solo. Denny Zeitlin, from a Chicago family devoted to medicine and music, had come to New York for a 10-week fellowship in psychiatry at Columbia University. But the medical student, a pianist since the age of 2 and a professional musician during his high-school years, had also found time during his New York sojourn to study with the seminal composer George Russell, who became one of his champions, and to sit in with some of the city's leading jazz players.



That was how the saxophonist Paul Winter came to introduce the pianist to Columbia Records' influential producer John Hammond. "At that point," Dr. Zeitlin recalled recently, "I didn't have aspirations of recording; I was resonating with the bitter and cynical remarks many fellow musicians made about the recording scene and didn't wish to risk a record label telling me what to play." Hammond auditioned the young man, offered him a contract for several albums, and promised that he could record whatever music he chose and pick his own sidemen.

Mr. Zeitlin's initial Columbia assignment was as pianist on "Flute Fever" by Jeremy Steig, another young artist recruited by Hammond. Mr. Steig, son of the brilliant cartoonist William Steig, was, and is, a flutist of audacity, force and humor.

On the Sonny Rollins composition "Oleo," Mr. Steig and Mr. Zeitlin each soloed with ferocious thrust, chutzpah, swing and -- one of the most challenging accomplishments in jazz -- a feeling of delirious freedom within the discipline of a harmonic structure. Mr. Rollins's tune is based on the chord changes of George Gershwin's "I Got Rhythm," apart from the blues the most familiar pattern in jazz. The flutist and pianist used it for two of the most exhilarating rides anyone since Charlie Parker had taken on "Rhythm" changes.

Great as they both were, if I were forced to referee, I'd have to give the round to the future doctor. His four choruses constitute one of the most memorable stretches of improvisation ever captured on record by an unknown player. After Bill Evans and Billy Taylor heard the album, they offered Mr. Zeitlin encouragement and support. Evans later helped to make a jazz standard of the Zeitlin composition "Quiet Now." For all of its impact and subsequent fame, "Flute Fever" has never been reissued on compact disc. Copies of the LP, when they can be found, sell on the Internet for \$200 and more. Three of the four trio albums Mr. Zeitlin later recorded for Columbia have fared better, thanks to their release last month in a boxed CD set on the Mosaic label. As Mr. Zeitlin continued his medical studies, he recorded "Cathexis" with bassist Cecil McBee and drummer Freddie Waits. After getting his medical degree in 1964, he moved to California. Juggling music and a rotating internship at San Francisco General Hospital, Dr. Zeitlin found work for his new trio at the Trident, a small club across the bay in Sausalito. The group featured the sensitive, reactive drummer Jerry Granelli and Charlie Haden, a bassist who had made his name breaking bounds with the iconoclastic saxophonist Ornette Coleman.

Through the 1960s, three Zeitlin Trio albums followed. All but "Live at the Trident" are in the new CD box. Mosaic producer Michael Cuscuna says it may follow the other two into rerelease. The Mosaic collection also includes 13 previously unissued tracks from the albums "Cathexis," "Carnival" and "Zeitgeist." Listening to a track from "Carnival" in a 1965 Down Beat magazine blindfold test, Thelonious Monk said, "Hey, play that again. Yeah! He sounds like a piano player! (hums theme) . . . and he can play it; you know what's happening with this one."

Denny Zeitlin and John Hammond parted company after the pianist moved into the avant-garde, melding jazz with electronic, rock and classical music. Dr. Zeitlin says, "I can't fault him or Columbia for not wanting to follow me into a new area I was becoming increasingly enamored with." His love affair with synthesizers, ring modulators, multiple keyboards and "miles of cords, foot pedals and foot switches" lasted from 1968 to 1978. It climaxed with his score for the 1978 remake of the film "Invasion of the Body Snatchers." "When that was over," Dr. Zeitlin says in a video clip on his Web site, "I'd not only had enough of movie scores -- I had a hunger for the purity of acoustic music."

He has since satisfied that hunger in solo and trio concerts and recordings -- a career total of 18 albums as leader -- all while practicing and teaching psychiatry in the San Francisco Bay area. He reunited with Haden for recordings and has played often with two other premier bassists, David Friesen and Buster Williams, as well as former Miles Davis drummer Al Foster.

None of the trios in Dr. Zeitlin's long history of recording are more stunning than the current one with bassist Williams and Matt Wilson, an explosive drummer heavily in demand in jazz. Their "In Concert" CD (Sunnyside Records), also released last month, catches Dr. Zeitlin, at age 70, in his musical prime and his trio afire. They perform tonight at Dizzy's Club Coca-Cola in New York's Lincoln Center.

Music and psychiatry are not enough to absorb Dr. Zeitlin's curiosity and energy. Tall, bearded, lean as a figure in an El Greco painting, he is also devoted to mountain biking, fishing, gastronomy and wine. Nor does he dabble in those interests. As with music and psychiatry, he pursues them. His newest passion is his Web site. With the aid of Internet maven Bret Primack, Dr. Zeitlin recently set up shop at www.dennyzeitlin.com. There, he discusses what he calls the "balancing act" of his dual commitment to psychiatry and music, the "profoundly meditative" experience of fly fishing, and the challenge of cycling on rock staircases in Utah. He also gives an eloquent video tour of his wine cellar that is vintage Zeitlin.

Mr. Ramsey is the winner of the 2008 Lifetime Achievement Award of the Jazz Journalists Association. He blogs about jazz and other matters at www.dougramsey.com.