

Mostly Music

<http://ronanguil.blogspot.com/2010/07/overlooked-masterpieces-1-denny-zeitlin.html>

Overlooked Masterpieces 1 - Denny Zeitlin



(Since I wrote this post I received some factual corrections, observations and clarifications from Denny - I've added these in an addendum to the blog - please make sure to read this at the end of the post)

Denny Zeitlin is the exception that proves the rule - the rule in this case being that contemporary jazz is such a complex and demanding art form that to be a true master of it demands that one devotes one's entire attention to it, and spends one's whole life in its singular pursuit. This 'rule' is something that I actually believe to be true – while there have been many fine part-time jazz musicians, there's never really been many (if any?) who only devoted some of their time to it yet played it at truly the very highest level. In fact I would go as far as to say that it's not possible to really play it at the very highest level while devoting half of your time to doing something completely different.

Or perhaps it's more accurate to state that I *would* say that if I didn't know about Denny Zeitlin.....

Zeitlin is, and has been for over 40 years, a full time psychiatrist and a part-time jazz musician – or at least part-time in that he has always fulfilled a fulltime role as a medical man while presumably (though I don't know this for sure), playing jazz only when he has time away from his medical practice.

And what is extraordinary about him is not that you could say he's an amazing jazz pianist considering he doesn't devote himself full time to it – what's extraordinary is that he is a truly great jazz pianist by *any* standard. He is truly world class, and always has been ever since the time he came to New York as a medical student in the early 1960s, playing gigs and making recordings while studying medicine .

His brilliance and originality is immediately evident on the first recordings he appeared on, and no less than Bill Evans recorded his beautiful composition 'Quiet Now' which became a staple of Evans' repertoire at that time. He released several albums during the 60s and then seemed to disappear from performance, emerging again in the early 80s with a beautiful duo recording for ECM with Charlie Haden ('[Time Remembers One Time Once](#)'), and even locking horns with Herbie Hancock on Straight No Chaser from a live recording, ('Jazz at the Opera House'), that I don't think has ever been released on CD, but is one on which Zeitlin demonstrates again his right to be considered as one of the truly great jazz pianists.

Yet he remains under-appreciated and under-recognized, despite the fact that he remains active as a pianist and is playing as well as ever both [solo](#), and in his [trio](#) with Buster Williams and Matt Wilson. I was recently talking to some musician friends of mine, and I brought Zeitlin's name up, and while some of them had heard his name, few were aware of his work, and none were aware of the great trio recordings he made in the early 60s. I think it's a travesty that these recordings are not better known – hence this blog post.

In 1964, while only 25 years old, he made what is for me an incredibly forward looking and prophetic piano trio album – [Cathexis](#) – with Cecil McBee and Freddie Waits. This recording is full of compositional, pianistic and ensemble concepts that were very uncommon at the time, but that later went on to become part and parcel of the contemporary jazz pianist's (and musician's) vocabulary. It was very far ahead of its time in so many ways.



At a festival we were both playing at in Belgium last year I had the good fortune to have a conversation with Cecil McBee, the bassist on [Cathexis](#), during which I brought up this recording ([Cathexis](#)) and asked Cecil about it. He said a very interesting thing – he told me that it was the first recording he (and Freddie Waits), made in New York when he arrived there, but that in hindsight he felt that he wasn't really ready to make that recording. When I asked him what he meant by that, he said that though his reading skills and technique were in good condition due to his just having left music college, and he was able to negotiate the many technical difficulties of the music, at the same time he said that the conceptual material was so varied and demanding, he felt that he didn't have the experience at that time to deal with the music in the way he now wished he could have.

Listening to [Cathexis](#) even now, there are so many challenges for the rhythm section, and so many varieties of feel and approach demanded of them. Waits and McBee do a fantastic job on the music, especially given the difficulties involved - I wonder if they did any gigs in preparation for the recording..... Even today this music would be challenging, I can't imagine what it must have been like to be faced with those pieces at that time – it remains incredible to me that this recording was conceived and recorded in early 1964, and by someone who wasn't devoting all of his time to music!

For example – here are a few audio clips which give an idea of the sheer breadth of conception and ease of execution of this music and this CD (Thanks to Mr. Zeitlin for permission to use these clips - depending on your internet connection some clips may load slowly, if so, please be patient)

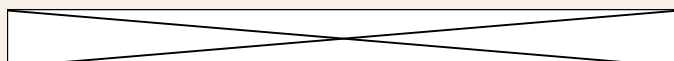
'**I-Thou**' is an exquisite melody, which has a wonderful circular feel with a deceptively tricky form – melody is one of Zeitlin's great gifts



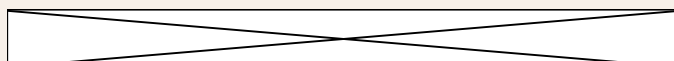
'**Stonehenge**' on the other hand, is a fast modal piece that has a hair-raising (for the rhythm section) rhythmic and densely chorded section that's used to launch the solos. Even in today's jazz world, where we're used to rhythmically difficult passages in the music, this would be considered challenging.



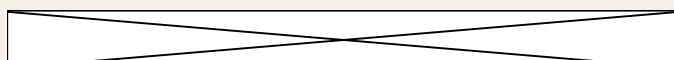
The use of 20th century harmony (as in the chromatic harmony of Schoenberg and Stravinsky, featuring stacked triads etc.) to re-harmonise standards became very popular in jazz the mid-to late 70s, particularly through the work of [Richie Beirach](#) and [Dave Liebman](#). But Zeitlin was doing this many years before, such as in this take on Gershwin's classic '**Soon**'



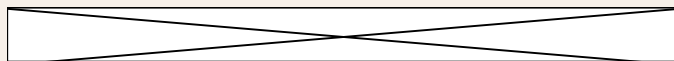
Or how about this chromatic take on the even more classic '**Round Midnight**.....



'**Nica's Tempo**' on the other hand features many tempo changes - a very unusual thing in a piano trio recording in 1964, though Mingus had been using it as a compositional device for a while



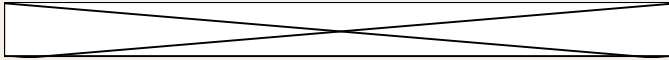
'**Little Children, Don't Go Near That House**' (the title is worth the price of admission alone!) is a very unusual melody showing a real original mind at work - the harmony is dense, the melody is lyrical and a little poignant, yet stylistically unclassifiable.....



'**Cathexis**' itself is a burn-out, with lots of chords including the fast moving Trane type progression heard here that shows that Zeitlin, along with pretty much everyone else at that time, was affected by Coltrane's contemporary harmonic explorations



And finally - an extended form composition - in this case an exploration of the minor blues. '**Blue Phoenix**' works its way through three different sections, starting off very slowly with solo piano before getting into an extraordinary evocation of a walking bass line with the left hand of the piano. Zeitlin has always been brilliant at this (check out his 'Billie's Bounce' from 'Time Remembers One Time Once' on ECM for another amazing example). As a bassist I've rarely heard pianists successfully imitate the feel of a walking bass line - it's usually too angular and percussive. But Zeitlin seems to have figured out how to get that legato driving thing that bassists often do - as in this example:



He finishes '**Blue Phoenix**' as a fast burning minor blues, utilising the following accelerando (another rare thing in jazz) to get to the desired tempo



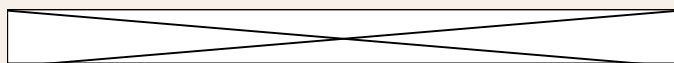
He moved to the West Coast in the mid-60's and in between his medical work put together a new trio with Jerry Granelli and Charlie Haden which made several recordings - 'Carnival', 'Live at the Trident' and (with Joe Halpin on bass and Oliver Johnson on drums on half of it) 'Zeitgeist'. Carnival and Zeitgeist were recently released on a **Mosaic box set** that also includes 'Cathexis', though the Trident recording wasn't included in this collection for some reason.

While Haden and Granelli recorded more extensively with Zeitlin and form an obvious trio rapport with him, I've always been very fond of the pieces on Zeitgeist that have the Joe Halpin/Oliver Johnson bass and drum team. They have a muscularity of approach that really fires the music and puts it into other areas.

This is particularly true on '**Dormammu**' where Zeitlin shows the breadth of his creative abilities yet again. Here he ventures into some ferocious open improvisation with Halpin and Johnson that shows he was au fait with the 60s free scene



I also really like Johnson's time feel too - he has a wonderfully springy cymbal feel with an edge to it - slightly pushy but not rushing, reminiscent of Jack DeJohnette's time feel. '**Night and Day**' is a good example



And finally, have a listen to the playfulness of the way they play the hoary old classic '**I Got Rhythm**' - dense voicings yet underpinned with real swing



These albums contain an extraordinary amount of improvisational and compositional approaches - extended form, lyrical ballads, complex rhythms, sophisticated chromatic reharmonization of standards, free playing, fantastic swing. They are major statements in the art of the possible for piano trio, and given the time they were made, were very prophetic. The dominant piano trio influence in mainstream jazz in the 60s was Bill Evans, yet to my mind, these trio recordings show a greater variety of approach within what is largely a conventional jazz context, than does the various Evans trios. This is not to denigrate the Evans trios, but rather is meant to point up the extraordinary achievements of the Zeitlin trios.

Achievements that have not been given their due recognition. Which brings us back to the opening point - can you really reach the highest level you can reach if you don't devote yourself full time to the music? I think it's clear that Zeitlin has reached and surpassed the level that most full time pianists can reach. But could the achievements have been even greater had he devoted himself fulltime to music? He certainly would have been given greater recognition - as Monk famously said, even if you don't have a gig you should always be on the scene. Out of sight, out of mind is a truism - there's no doubt that Zeitlin's absence from the scene - especially in NY - has contributed to the lack of awareness of his work, especially today.

However he has an interesting take on all of this, in which he posits the idea that his medical and musical work feed off each other. So - do check out these great trio albums, check out [what he's doing currently](#), and let's leave the last words to him

Addendum

After I wrote this blog I received a message from Denny pointing out a couple of factual errors and giving some insight into some of the points I raised.

With regard to the errors - 'Billie's Bounce' was actually recorded on a Palo Alto recording called [Tidal Wave](#). And the audio clip version of 'I Got Rhythm' that I posted featured the bass and drum team of Charlie Haden and Jerry Granelli – there's a different version featuring Joe Halpin and Oliver Johnson on the bonus tracks of the Mosaic Box Set I mentioned in the post.

Here are Denny's observations and clarifications:

It is accurate that over the years I have maintained a primary responsibility to patient care and psychiatric education, and have woven music into this fabric as best as I have been able.

Re my "disappearance" : After the Columbia series of 5 LPs in the sixties, I became very interested in the integration of acoustic and electronic instruments, jazz, classical, rock, funk, and free music. I withdrew from public performance for several years while I got the instrumentation, technology, and group together, and then performed this music through the seventies. This journey was recorded on the small independent label, 1750 Arch, and culminated in my acoustic-symphonic-electronic score for the remake of "Invasion of the Body Snatchers." That score was recently released on CD. I then returned to a focus on acoustic music, and the duet album for ECM with Charlie soon followed, reaching a larger audience.

Re Cathexis: I had one night of rehearsal with Cecil before our first recording session, and met Freddie for the first time in the studio. We never gigged as a trio. I agree that they did an absolutely superb job on the date. It was very interesting to learn of Cecil's conversation with you.

RE Blue Phoenix: You might want to mention also that my new solo CD, "Precipice," has several examples of walking bass lines at different tempos.

RE the Mosaic Box Set: The reason Live At The Trident was not included in this set is that the set focuses exclusively on the studio dates. Mosaic plans to release LATT on CD, probably within the next 12 months.

(Your description of the Johnson/Halpin team and Oliver's contribution is right on, and tallies with my experience of them.)

RE: I Got Rhythm: The version you audio-clipped and described is actually one of the Haden/Granelli

Bonus tracks. The version with Johnson/Halpin is the very brief, more avant-garde reconstructed/deconstructed track 6 of Disc #3.

Many, many thanks for your support of my music, Ronan, and I hope our paths will cross in person before too long.

All best,

Denny

Posted by [Ronan Guilfoyle](#) at 4:19 PM 

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6 comments:



[allen mez](#) said...

Maybe one of the keys to his seemingly diverse careers is that they're not "completely different". As he eloquently illustrates in the video, his psychiatric practice informed his music and in a way is a parallel creative pursuit. Each discipline influences the other and gives his point of view the fresh perspective tantamount to artistic growth. To be an artist is to commit to a strong point of view of ones life experiences. The result is your voice or style. Often this "style" can make it hard to grow and we all have to challenge how we look at things to avoid just playing "the shit we know". He has solved this trap rather uniquely.

In terms of the logistical time needed to play this music, think of the countless hours many geniuses have wasted ravaging their bodies and minds with a vice of some sort. Although some could make the argument that it was these sordid experiences that gave them their ability to look at things uniquely and grow providing it didn't kill them too soon.

Another fresh inventive blog post (by a fresh inventive bass player. You dig?)

July 29, 2010 4:44 PM



Luis said...

Other than Denny's music, I found it amazing that the man himself contacted you. It adds such depth to one's work, from either side. To be aware that a multitude of people acknowledge your work, be it your music or your writing, even if it is through such a medium as a blog...

August 2, 2010 5:54 PM



Ronan Guilfoyle said...

Yes Luis - it was amazing for me to be in touch with Denny - a real privilege!

The US saxophonist, broadcaster, educator and composer Bill Kirchner was in touch with me regarding this post, and he made some very interesting observations, which I'm reproducing here with his permission - thanks Bill.

Great post on Denny, a good friend as well as a musical hero of mine for 40 years.

Glad you mentioned "Jazz At The Opera House" (Columbia), one of the great unsung jazz albums of the past 30 years. It *is* available on CD, but only as a pricey Japanese import. And in any case, only a fraction of the music from a 3 & 1/2-hour concert was ever released. Denny tells me, for example, that there's an unreleased 2-piano version of "Round Midnight" with him and Herbie Hancock, as well as an opening solo piece by Denny called "Cascades".

A few years ago, there was some forward motion at Sony about issuing the remainder of the concert, but with major labels' jazz reissue programs mostly at a standstill, that now seems unlikely to happen.

BTW, if you can find his "fusion" LPs ("Expansion" and "Syzygy," both trio, with multi-keyboards) on the 1750 Arch label from the '70s, I think that you'll find them most unique and interesting.

Bill

August 5, 2010 8:23 PM



joesh said...

Hi Ronan, just thought you should/could add this into your post (for fun) as Denny is not only an expert in music and the mind but also wine

<http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=s4beTAp292I>

Best - Joe

August 6, 2010 11:48 PM



Marc Hannaford said...

Just got the Mosaic box under the influence of this post....cheers mate!

July 29, 2011 8:08 PM



Ronan Guilfoyle said...

Thanks Marc - great to meet you and play in Sao Paulo!