

Denny Zeitlin



Jazz Eclectic Scores Body Snatchers

Zeitlin's equipment (clockwise from L): Urei digital metronome (at upper left), Klipsch speaker, TEAC 2-track tape recorder, Steinway 9' grand, Micromoog, Oberheim digital sequencer, junction box for interfacing Moog, ARP, and Oberheim sequencer, Minimoog-type pitch and modulation wheels for the Odyssey, ARP Odyssey, Fender delay unit, Ober-

heim ring modulator, Maestro phase shifter, Farfisa organ, Clavinet, Ibanez flanger, Rhodes electric piano, Prophet 10, Sound Workshop 8-channel mixer with parametric EQ, TEAC/Tascam 80-8 8-track recorder, and TEAC 2-track machine.

By Dominic Milano

FOUR APPEARANCES ON THE *Johnny Carson Show*, albums on Columbia and 1750 Arch Records, a major film score for *Invasion Of The Body Snatchers*, and music for television's *Sesame Street* are only some of his credits. On top of all those is the fact that he's also a full-time practicing psychiatrist. Where does Denny Zeitlin find the time? No, he doesn't invent it, and he doesn't think of himself as a workaholic either. He's just very much into both music and medicine.

He plays multiple keyboards, but like most players, his roots go back to the acoustic piano. He was fiddling with piano when he was two years old, doing what music he could at that age—free improvisation. He's been developing his abilities at free impro-

visation and composition ever since, incorporating materials from all sorts of styles into his playing. Within any given Zeitlin piece, you're likely to hear well-integrated snippets of bebop that shift into snippets of Bartók. On his home record shelf, you'll find a copy of *Ginger Baker's Air Force* occupying a space next to a recording of some Elliott Carter string quartets. Zeitlin's music frequently jumps back and forth between the avant-garde and the traditional; between jazz, rock, and classical.

His recent scoring of the United Artists film *Invasion Of The Body Snatchers* focused a lot of attention on Denny. It was Zeitlin's first work for orchestra, and this being the case, it had a fresh newborn kind of energy, an energy which was obviously noticed by the right people. A soundtrack album was produced from the film's score, and that

doesn't happen all the time. It's something of an honor for a film composer to get.

WHAT'S IT LIKE FOR YOU to hold down two careers at once?

It requires a certain amount of scheduling, but it's been a part of my life since I was very young. It feels very natural to me to have music and my medical practice going on at the same time. I came from a family where medicine and music were very much a part of the household. My father is a radiologist and my mother is a speech pathologist. They are both musicians as well. My dad played mostly by ear and my mother was a trained pianist. She wasn't a concert pianist, but she was good nonetheless. When I was young I knew I'd do something in both of those areas, but I had no

PHOTOS BY JOSEPHINE ZEITLIN

idea what shape my involvement would take. I was interested in people, science, and medicine. I wanted to know what made people tick. I think I was sort of a lay therapist at age seven. I started diddling around with the piano when I was about two or three, first sitting on my parents' laps as they played and getting a kind of kinesthetic feel for the keyboard—just riding along with my hands on their hands. Then I began to pick up melodies and things. The first things I did as a kid were really free improvisations. When I was about six I think my mother started teaching me how to read notes. I studied formal classical piano for about eight or nine years until I got into high school. I was never particularly interested or eager to keep up a classical repertoire or to play recitals of classical music. Once I got to know a piece and understood how it was put together, I was much more eager to hear someone else play it. I would much rather have used the information and the material I picked up from learning a piece in a free improvisation.

When did you get into jazz?

When I was in eighth grade I remember hearing a record that my music teacher brought over to my house. It was called *You're Hearing George Shearing*. It was a 10-inch record. Marvelous. It appealed to me because I was into the classical thing and Shearing was playing jazz with such incredible classical chops. From there she brought over Art Tatum records and Dave Brubeck's first trio albums on Fantasy Records. Then I really went into orbit with jazz. Initially, I played with some dixieland bands in high school. I don't think I was ever interested in dixieland, but it was something that I felt I had to learn to play. It was considered modern music when I was growing up.

What about classical things? What type of music were you studying before you got into jazz?

I jumped from Bach all the way to the Impressionists. I never got emotionally involved with Beethoven or Mozart. I could appreciate the form and admire their elegance, but if something's going to grab my heart, it's got to be Bach or something with very different harmonic material in it. So it was logical for me to fall in love with bop the first time I heard it. I formed a bop band with a guitar-playing friend in high school, and I started going down to the South Side of Chicago. At the time, things were very open racially. It was perfectly cool for a white kid to walk into an all-black club as long as you looked like you were 21. The players would even coach me and let me sit in. There were an awful lot of monster players around then; [bassist] Bobby Cranshaw, [drummer] Walter Perkins, [multi-instrumentalist] Ira Sullivan, [bassist] Wilber Ware, Ahmad Jamal . . . It was an incredibly good place for me to be and play. There were occasional nibbles from people saying that I should record. But I'd always say, "Hey, man. I don't want to get into that bullshit. I just want to play music. I don't want to worry about selling albums."

What did you do when you got into college?

When I was in pre-med school down at the University of Illinois in Champaign, I was close enough to Chicago to drive up there on weekends and keep playing. There were also a lot of people there in Champaign. [Guitarist] Wes Montgomery, Jack McDuff, [multi-reed player] Joe Farrell, and Roger Kellaway were all hanging around. It was a good musical four years. When I went on to medical school, I decided that I wanted to get a taste of what it was like on the East Coast, so I went to Johns Hopkins in Baltimore — very traditional, formal Eastern mecca. I lucked out there too. [Saxophonist] Gary Bartz's father owned a nightclub in Baltimore and I used to sit in there a lot. A lot of heavyweights used to play there. Then around 1963, [saxophonist] Paul Winter, who I'd known from Chicago, started bugging me to play for his producer, John Hammond. I kept putting him off because I thought recording was some kind of musical prostitution. Then I got a Fellowship at Columbia University in the spring of '63. Since I was in New York, I broke down and went to see John Hammond.

What was that like?

It was curiously effortless. He was an effusive, lovely guy who just said, "Why don't you play something on the piano there." I played something for him, and he said, "I love it. Let's do it, let's record whatever you want to do. Whoever you want to get to record with you, great." I thought it couldn't be all that bad, so we started talking and making plans. He suggested that before doing my first trio album I ought to get some recording experience by being the pianist on the first [flutist] Jeremy Steig album. I can still sit down and listen to that album and enjoy it. A half a year later, I recorded my first trio album, *Cathexis*. I used two rhythm players from Paul [Winter's] band, [percussionist] Freddy Waits and [bassist] Cecil McBee. That really started a relationship with Columbia that lasted from '65 to '68. I recorded five albums over that span.

There was never any pressure to record what they wanted you to record?

No, remarkably little. It was an excellent relationship. When I compare it to stories I've heard about everybody else and their producers, I can't believe it. I naively began to think that that was the way it was. So I'm blithely going along attending medical school and recording for Columbia, and nothing was getting derailed. Everything felt fine. When the time came for me to do my medical internship I knew that I didn't want to live in either Chicago or New York, so I decided to try the West Coast. And I lucked out again. Albert Stinson was out here. He was a great upright bass player. Magnificent. We played together for a whole summer. [Bassist] Charlie Haden was at Synanon and we began an association that lasted for about three years, recording several albums together. Jerry Granelli was also out here. He was the drummer that I used for several of my albums. But it all worked out in conjunction with my internship schedule. I played two and a half years of Monday nights at a lounge and worked

out my schedule around that. I busted my ass so that I could have Monday nights free to play music on. Likewise, when I went through my psychiatric residency at Langley-Porter, I worked it out so that I could continue to concertize, record, and complete my residency. Now I'm through my training and into private practice and I can schedule my time as I like. I work maybe 25 to 30 hours a week in psychiatry, which leaves me plenty of time for music and plenty of time to spend with my wife, Josephine. We give ourselves a lot of time and space to hang out and do things. I wouldn't want to paint a picture of myself as a workaholic, because I'm not. I've got a couple of things going on, but it seems to have a comfortable flow.

What made you leave Columbia Records?

Right around 1966-1967 I found that I wanted to explore other worlds of music beyond the jazz trio. I didn't have much of a yearning to form a big band or to have a quintet with horns and stuff, and I had overdosed on doing sessions for horn players where you'd comp on "Cherokee" for three hours. I'd had enough of that and I was getting the feeling that jazz and rock were much too polarized. Jazz musicians were so angry at the commercial success of rock cats that they weren't allowing themselves to even listen to the music to see what was going on. I've always been a both/and sort of person, not an either/or person. I've always been interested in integrating worlds, whether they were the seemingly disparate worlds of psychiatry and music or the worlds within music itself. I wanted to be able to do more things than the piano would allow. For some years I'd been doing prepared piano sorts of things, and that offered a lot of timbral possibilities, but I really wanted to be able to bend notes. So I wanted to get into electronics. But at the time, there weren't many people you could talk to to get into electronic music. The guys I was playing with in the jazz trio were really not into going that way at all, and I realized that I would simply have to drop out of sight for several years and do some R&D to find out about electronic instruments. I went into a lot of blind alleys.

This was still during the mid- and late-'60s?

Right. Before they had commercial ring modulators and phase boxes and stuff. I met some people who could design stuff like that for me, but after a few months of waiting for them to do it I came to the conclusion that these special engineers were often paranoid and difficult to deal with.

What was the first piece of electronic gear you ended up getting?

The first electronic keyboard I acquired was a Clavinet. I found a guy in California who would bend the hammers for me in a special way so I could bend the notes on the Clavinet to get a very guitar-like feeling. I was very excited about that. Then I began to get pedals. All sorts of devices. Then the second keyboard I got was an organ, a Farfisa organ, which I still have. It's an old warhorse. I never really liked the sound of the Rhodes, but I ended up get-

ting a Rhodes electric piano next. I'd been playing the Melodica for a long time so I included that in the setup too. It was another timbre. It's very easy to get very personal sounds with embouchure techniques, and the Melodica fit very well into the avant-garde type of free improvisation I was doing. Eventually I added some synthesizers to the setup. I'm using an ARP Odyssey and a Micromoog now. Those are linked together in various assignable ways with a little junction box that John Vieira of Waves [743 First St., Suite 4, Napa, CA 94558] designed for me. There's also an old Oberheim digital sequencer that I use with those synthesizers. The most recent addition to my setup is the Prophet 10-voice synthesizer.

Did you have any trouble finding people who were interested in playing the kinds of experimental things you did?

Initially, yes. I eventually found George Marsh and Mel Graves, who are just beautiful players that I've worked with for the last 10 years. They went on the road with the Jerry Hahn Brotherhood for a while so it hasn't been continuous, we all have other kinds of projects going, but we continue to play together. We refuel each other. Mel came to California from Ohio. His main thing was playing upright bass, but he was willing to get an electric bass and learn what rock was all about. When we started playing together we studied rock and roll, listened to Chicago blues players like Muddy Waters, and got into those really good black drummers, man, who just had that feeling. We started studying the nature of time and how different it was listening to these blues and rock players compared to jazz players. In terms of pulse, rock and blues players are always right at the center of the beat as opposed to right on top of the beat the way it always is in jazz. It would be typified by the sort of Tony Williams ride style of drumming. That's a jazz beat, always pushing, pushing, pushing. In rock and roll, it's got to be centered right in the solar plexus. It's got to feel like time is moving out from the tips of your fingers into the solar plexus. We started to work with that, moving back and forth between jazz and rock rhythms. It seemed to be an issue that other people hadn't really addressed themselves to. I was hearing that when some jazz players tried to play rock it sounded very skittery. It sounded very much like a jazz musician trying to play rock and roll.

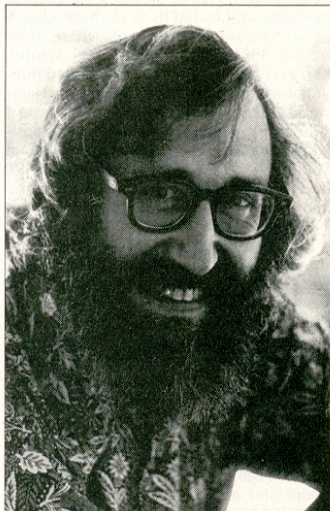
You get the same effect when a rock musician tries to play jazz.

Right. We began to be very conscious of that. We got to where we could flow between those forms. I've always been interested in odd meters, even in high school, so we applied being able to switch from those rhythmic feelings to rock and jazz styles to playing in odd meters like 13 and 27. We sent some tapes around to record companies in 1971 and they seemed to like the music but they had no idea how they could sell it. It wasn't jazz and it wasn't rock, so they had no idea of where to put it in record stores. I wasn't about to change what we were doing, and a couple of years later I said, "What the hell, I'm going to put out an album of this stuff myself." So I decided

to form a mail-order label. Researched how to do it and got a good lawyer to help me set it up, and formed Double Helix Records. I advertised in *Down Beat* and *CK*. We sold out the first 2,000 pressings of *Expansion*, and I began to feel that I would be spending too much time as an administrator and wrapper of albums. So I started looking for a way to get out from under things without losing too much momentum.

What did you do?

Fortunately 1750 Arch Records [1750 Arch St., Berkeley, CA 94709] decided they would like to acquire the album and put it out on their own label, which felt very



natural to me because I had recorded the album at their studios. I'd been a long-time friend of Tom Buckner, who is the head of Arch and also a very fine singer. Phill Sawyer had been my engineer and he is now the executive director there, so it felt right. They didn't change anything except the label name. I changed the liner notes to explain what had happened and they put the record out. I made *Syzygy* a couple of years later, and now there is solo piano album coming out shortly. It's all free improvisations recorded at live performances. There are a few things that I did in my studio in my home too.

Why did you go back to the piano after playing multiple keyboards for so long?

It's a nice shift. It's a return to my earliest roots. It gave me a chance to get into the piano again. I like to try to keep all of the worlds of music that I've touched alive within me. I've been doing solo piano concerts and concerts that are a third solo piano and two-thirds ensemble. I'm hoping to do more and more interesting kinds of things with concerts. Hopefully whatever momentum the movie project has may help get a larger label interested. Maybe I'll be able to get a little more exposure and some larger budgets to do some more ambitious things.

Backtracking a bit, what did you have to do to get used to playing all of the various

different types of actions between your electric keyboards?

It was just a matter of playing them enough to get a kinesthetic feel for them. The whole setup feels like one big axe to me now. I've always set up the keyboards in the same way. When it's fully set up it looks like the cockpit of a 747. The tendency you have when you play with the lighter action keyboards like the Clavinet and the synthesizers is to speed up and skitter on them. You have to develop a kind of definiteness in the way you strike the notes in order to keep your time together. One thing I have noticed is that on my own Steinway, I've got a medium/light action, so if I go to do a concert and there's a stiff-actioned piano, I'm in trouble. I don't work out on a heavy-duty action so I usually specify on a contract what I don't want to end up with. It can really be rude awakening!

Have you ever thought about putting in heavier springs in your electronic keyboards to beef up their actions?

No. I never have, because I don't mind the light actions. They feel okay. They've never been a problem to me.

Your piano bench is actually cut down to put you very low to the floor. Why did you do that?

I have a very long torso and I like to sit so that I can really dig into the keyboard when I play, so I had to saw off the legs of my piano bench to put me at the right level in front of the piano.

Did you listen to anyone in particular when you were getting into electronic keyboards?

It was more a case of having to work things out myself, because there weren't many people doing it when I wanted to get into it. I listened to a lot of rock and roll records. If I heard a sound I liked I would try to figure out how it was made. I hung around with a lot of musicians and engineers, so my vocabulary eventually started to incorporate terms associated with electronic keyboard gear. I've never become an electronics expert in the sense that I could build my own synthesizers. Instead I've tried to become an expert on who will do what for me. I rapidly found out that it was a mistake to imagine that I could find one person that could do all of the various things I need. I would find a guy who really handled adjusting the Rhodes well; somebody who could work with pedals; somebody who'd do my synthesizer work; etc. It was very unlikely that the synthesizer expert could work on my wah-wah pedal.

Who are the people you've found?

Oh, let's see . . . John Vieira has done most of my synthesizer work. I think he's extremely skilled and fair. Very reliable. The people at Sequential Circuits [1172G Aster Ave., Sunnyvale, CA 94086] handle everything to do with my Prophet. They just recently worked on my Prophet 10, upgrading it to make it work properly. [Ed. Note: Only Prophet 5-voice machines are being sold presently. A new 10-voice will be released by the time this article appears, but the earlier 10-voices were exactly like the Prophet 5's currently available, except that

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you could play 10 instead of 5 notes at once on the keyboard. They were discontinued after only five were manufactured because of tuning problems.] One of the people who's been most reliable to me for recommending things has been Patrick Gleeson. When I started the electronic work Patrick had a small studio in San Francisco. He was using a four-track TEAC Tascam machine. Now he's got Different Fur studio [3470 19th St., San Francisco, CA 94110]. I got most of my synthesizers through him. The head of maintenance over at Fantasy Records has done a lot of repair and modification work on general keyboards and pedals and stuff for me. Carl Countryman [of Countryman piano pickup fame] did some esoteric getting-rid-of-noise in some of my equipment. He's a genius! I was living up on Twin Peaks in San Francisco and I was getting radar blip periodically in my Klipsch speakers. He came up one day, took off the top of the speakers, took this little capacitor — he looked like an eye surgeon you fly in from Tibet—and fixed it. There are a lot of other people like that who've saved my life as far as my gear goes.

Have you had any trouble with the Prophet 10? They reportedly didn't work very well as far as tuning goes.

That's been the only trouble I've had with it. It was always going out of tune with itself. That's why they stopped making them after they built five of them. They kindly

offered to let me take a 5-voice when they found out about the problem, but I wanted to be able to put both hands on that keyboard. I didn't care if I had to retune the instrument periodically. It has an automatic tuning thing anyway. Seeing that I had this movie project coming up, I wanted to have all the power that a 10-voice would give.

How did you get the gig scoring Invasion Of The Body Snatchers?

I'd always hoped that someday I'd get a chance to really score a big Hollywood film. I frankly thought it would never happen, because from what I'd heard, you have to live in Los Angeles, and you have to play a lot of political games. You have to kiss a lot of ass and maybe someday you'll get a project, but it won't be a good one. You'll have to do a lot of schlock films and establish some credentials and then maybe someday you'll get a major film. It didn't look like my life was going the way it needed to in order to land a major film project. I'd had the chance to score some documentary films, but it's not the same thing. Documentaries don't usually have to be timed as precisely. It was more like I'd provide some mood music for ambience and someone else would cut it in. Anyway, a year ago last September, we were playing with a group at the Keystone Korner in San Francisco, California, and Phil Kaufman came to hear us play. He had followed my music since I was in Chicago. He used to hear me play in clubs. It turned out that he had listened to all of my Columbia albums and we had met at a party 10 years ago and hit it off, but our

lives had taken different directions and we hadn't spoken since. He called the next day and said, "Hey man, I heard you guys and just loved it. How would you like to score this movie I'm directing?" He described the project and I thought it sounded fantastic. I'm an old science fiction fan so it sounded great. He wasn't offering me the job flat out, though—he was saying that he'd like me to do it and he wanted to talk about it. It became apparent to me that it wasn't in the bag and that there were a lot of issues involved. At the time, he was planning that Matt, the major character in the movie—played by Donald Sutherland—was going to be a jazz musician by trade. So he was thinking of having a jazz score. Then when he began to shoot the film, they rewrote some of the script and Sutherland wasn't a jazz musician anymore. I tried to keep in telephone contact with Kaufman, but I had the feeling that the chance was slipping away. He didn't want a jazz score so my work was cut out for me. If I wanted to get this project I had to convince him that even though I had lots of jazz credits and I'd never written anything for orchestra, I could handle it. I wasn't looking to embarrass him, but I felt that I could do this project and give him something very fresh and different. I couldn't do it with the ease that some of these Hollywood heavyweights could, but then the three weeks longer that it might take me might be made up for if it ended up more special. Eventually he was convinced enough to listen to what I might do. I played him all of my records, I improvised

for him, and he became more interested. He liked the electronic and prepared piano things. He liked the use of natural sounds fit into the electronic sounds because he already had the idea that the score would blend in with the sound effects. That's something that happens very rarely in movies.

You live very close to Ben Burt, who did some of the film's sound effects.

Yeah. Ben came in on the project at the same time I did. We talked about the philosophy of how sound effects and music might merge. I was very impressed with him. He did a couple of sequences in the movie that were just gorgeous. Convincing Bob Solo, the film's producer, and the other people at United Artists was a tough job, though. He received the tapes I sent him and he said that he was very concerned that I'd ruin his film. He didn't understand my music. There wasn't one major chord anywhere! He was worried that the score would be nothing but dissonance—of interest to cult people but detracting from the movie. If I had been him, I think I would have gone with a Hollywood heavyweight, because they had the budget and he didn't know me at all. But after talking I think he began to feel that I was serious. I told him that I would put every erg of energy I had to do the thing right.

Can you describe some of the steps involved in scoring the film once you'd been positively chosen to do it?

About three weeks after I'd talked with the producer the final cut of the film was made. We did what's called spotting the film. I had gotten a marvelous orchestrator by reputation, a guy named Greig McRitchie. I got the feeling that he wouldn't come in and pull the score away from me and make it his score. He seemed to understand what I wanted to try to do. Greig, Phil Kaufman, and I spotted the film. That's where you watch the film without music and talk about where the music should be. Exactly where it will start and stop. Roger Kellaway, who conducted the orchestra, had warned me the night before that I needed to pay strict attention to the temporary music tracks that the directors put in initially. They're not exactly what the directors want—they can't describe what they want musically—but they are examples of what they expect to hear. Roger told me not to dismiss them lightly. After we spotted the film, the movie editor and music editor put the reels on a movieola machine and timed the scenes down to a tenth of a second. They give you a final cue sheet that reads something like "38:1: Matt hits pod; 38:3: puts down shovel" Everything is written out so that you know how many frames need to have music, and what happens in those frames. Then I got a videotape of the film, which was invaluable, because the way I compose best is really by improvising. I don't go walking around on the street and visualize the music on the staves. I do it by feel.

How did you remember what you improvised? With some type of tape unit?

I've got an 8-track Tascam deck with a Sound Workshop board that I used to record

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with. I put on the videotape of the film to view a given scene and I would begin to improvise on the piano or one of the keyboards depending on what timbre I wanted to hear and work with. I'd play with the tape recorder on until I began to get some kind of compositional material. Themes would emerge eventually. Then I would have to make a decision whether a cue was going to be all electronic, or all prepared piano—all me to be recorded right there—or whether it was going to be an orchestral section blended with the keyboards. Once I made the decision I would look at the scene structurally and time it out exactly. If the music was going to be even meter throughout, then I'd use a click-track. I had a Urei digital metronome and a click-track book.

What was the click-track book for?

You can look up something like a 7/3 click and it will go from 1 to 600 clicks showing you that at click number 392 you've got 2:00.16. It goes to hundredths of a second. It saves you all of the computation that you would have to do with a calculator. It let me outline scenes very precisely. If I noted that Matt hit the pod at 38:3 seconds into a scene, then I could match the number of clicks in the click-track so that I could get a crescendo leading up to the point where the shovel comes crashing down on the pod. It helped avoid having things like seeing

Matt hit a pot and two seconds later hearing the music climax with a boom. It helped coordinate those things exactly. Once I'd gotten the timing worked out, I'd have to gather all of my improvisational materials and fit them into the scheme I had worked out. After that, the most lengthy part of it was trying to notate things that had to be written for a 60-piece orchestra. I was certainly aided by having a multi-track tape recorder and the Prophet. With them I could build up an approximation of an orchestra and check things out. It wouldn't sound exactly the same, but it was something I could present to the directors as a demo which was more effective and far richer sounding than a piano rendition. Kellaway said that directors understandably have a hard time imagining what a full orchestra would sound like doing what you demo for them on a piano. Sometimes they'll kill a cue prematurely because they can't hear the orchestra doing it. It might have been just what they wanted, but they couldn't tell that from just listening to the piano rendition of it. Through using the Prophet and the Tascam recorder, I had another chance of really getting in ear-to-ear contact with Kaufman. We were able to work closely on coordinating the music this way.

So you checked things with Kaufman constantly?

I didn't want to have any of the rude surprises I'd heard occurred where you're at the last phases of recording the orchestra and the conductor is at the podium, the

whole orchestra is there, and the director or producer strides down, takes the score, rips it in half, kicks out the composer, and hires somebody new. That happens all too frequently in Hollywood. I checked everything out with Phil along the way. I had his blessing on every cue before we went down to the studio, and it really paid off. There was 45 minutes of score and all of it but maybe two minutes was used in the film. I'm told that's an incredible batting average. They usually throw away 30% of the music for various reasons. Either they don't like it or it doesn't seem to fit. Maybe it steps on the sound effects or the dialogue.

What kind of effect did that have on the way your time was divided up between composing and checking with the director?

There were a lot of days spent more on the phone than at the piano, but most of those were spent more as my acting as my own contractor with studios and studio players. We did a lot of things at different studios and ended up at Different Fur in San Francisco transferring small ensemble recordings done at those other studios and interfacing those recordings with recordings of me on my Tascam 8-track, ending up with a composite on Different Fur's 24-track MCI machine. It was a tedious kind of thing. I would say that it was 80% arduous work, 20% fun—70% music and 30% mathematics. At times I felt like I was an intern in a hospital again, working an 18-hour day and getting up at six in the morning to drag my ass down to the studio. But the payoff

was when we went down to LA to record the orchestra.

You'd never worked with an orchestra before?

Never. I had a certain number of disaster fantasies: I was afraid my timing would be off even though I'd checked it four times. The conductor conducts to the movie, which is playing on a big screen. The orchestra often has to play to the click-track and you know right away when the timing is off. I imagined these ludicrous things, like Matt hits this pod and there's silence. All of a sudden you get the music going BAMmmmm! Then I'd have to run for my life, it would be so embarrassing. But I didn't make one timing mistake. The director and producer were ecstatic over the music, and when I first heard that 60-piece orchestra explode it was one of the most exciting musical experiences of my life. It was awesome. I'd pictured it in my mind, but these were all first-call studio players. Roger Kellaway had helped me get all the heavyweights—it was complex music. They got it together so fast that I was amazed. There was one section that was extremely fast and difficult to play and the first violinist put a piece of kleenex on the tip of his bow and hoisted it into the air waving it saying, "I surrender!" But then he proceeded to play the shit out of it. The orchestra was so excited about it [the score] that they were saying, "Let's take this orchestra on the road." One of the nicest compliments I ever received was from the first violinist. He told me, "I love your score. Of course, you've done many symphonies." And I said, "This is the first work for a large orchestra." He said, "Oh, you should write symphonies." And I was on cloud nine for the rest of the day.

You probably challenged the orchestra players.

I think that was it. They've had to play so many scores where they just sit and play whole notes for half an hour. These are skilled people with amazing chops and they want something they can sink their teeth into. They were pushed and they enjoyed it.

What kind of role did your orchestrator have?

He didn't change one note of my music. I would write a line and say this is for woodwinds, and we would talk about whether it would be mostly clarinets or double reeds or whatever. He would make that decision.

That kind of thing is beyond my capability. He knew whether it should be three oboes playing a line or two and how that would blend with the tuba line six staves below. He was a master at that kind of thing. I'm not. I think he did the perfect realization of what I'd written. I loved the guy. He was really laid back and humorous and yet he took the music very seriously. When I think back over how well the project went, I think that I couldn't have asked for a better situation. I got anything that I needed to make the project work. It was totally first-class. I'm leery of ever doing another score [laughs]. I am hoping to do more scores, but a gig like this only happens rarely. It all came off so well. And to put the icing on the cake, I got a soundtrack album out of it. Roger Kellaway, whom I admire a lot, has done 12 films, big films, and he's very well respected, but he's never had a soundtrack album.

Did you find any ignorance in the film industry with regard to recording techniques?

No, I had such autonomy with regard to recording that it was great. We were able to work at Different Fur, which is state-of-the-art, and Burbank Studios with people who are the best at recording orchestras of films. In five minutes, Danny Wallin, the guy at the mixing board, had the EQ set perfectly for the whole 60-piece orchestra. He was mixing it as if they were playing right in the room. It only took two days to mix the film in 6-track stereo Dolby. But we did find that there were a lot of people who didn't really

understand the things involved with Dolby and surround. It was hard for us to get the information we needed. We were very worried about the technology initially. We didn't want to end up doing anything that put egg on our faces. Pat Gleeson was very helpful in running the info down for us. I was worried that a lot of my equipment wouldn't get to me in time to do the score, too. There were a lot of critical pieces of machinery that I needed which I had to worry about getting in time: the Prophet, my 8-track, the digital metronome . . . It turned out that the digital metronome was very hard to find. I finally found a place in LA that had one in stock, but it isn't like everyone goes out to buy a digital metronome every day, so they don't have a run on them constantly. They make them about three times a year. That would have killed me had I not been able to get it. I would have been screwed. So at the beginning I had a lot of anxiety about getting my materials together. At least if I do another film I won't have to worry about it again. I'm all dressed and ready to go now.

Do you like the way Dolby sounds?

I don't have the experience to make a judgment. I have not been a student of film music through the years, and haven't been that aware when I go to a movie. I'm more interested in the content of the music, so I'm a neophyte about what I think about Dolby sound. After seeing the film in its final form, I thought it sounded pretty good.

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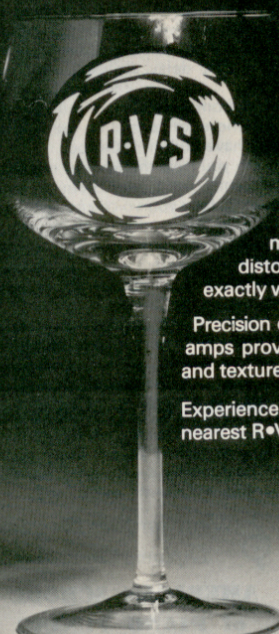
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DENNY ZEITLIN

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but I wished that the music had been mixed in hotter at certain points. I think composers are always wishing that. On the whole, the mix was good. I had hoped that they would have gotten the stuff all the way down to 50Hz, because they promised that they would. Remember that heartbeat pulsation stuff I did using the Prophet's Polymod section? It comes through a lot on the album. On the film, you could hear it, but not as much. It was more compressed. If it hadn't been for the Dolby, you wouldn't have heard jack shit. I saw the film in a theater that didn't have Dolby and it was appalling. I don't think the people noticed, but I was dying inside because the sound was so much worse.

Any version of the film must have been a bit of a letdown after hearing the soundtrack straight in the mixdown booth of a studio.

Oh, yeah. The mixdown at Burbank was actually the best it's ever sounded. Listening to the recording in the mixdown room was better than hearing it played live.

What kinds of things did you use the electronic keyboards for in the film score itself?

There were a lot of different things, done with both acoustic piano and electronic keyboards. There was also some prepared piano, and we used some oddball acoustic percussion instruments too, like waterphones. I used the Prophet a lot for low unison string bass notes. Things that sounded like they were coming from the center of the universe. You can't beat the sound of ten oscillators beating against each other slightly.

Twenty oscillators on your Prophet 10.

I guess you're right. It's incredible. And with the Polymod section you can get sounds that you just haven't heard before. I beefed up a lot of orchestral timbres by adding Prophet brass and string sounds. There were some sections where I beefed up the tubas and trombones by adding an octave lower Prophet brass note. Greig McRitchie was really excited about the effect. It sounded like another brass instrument, but it was impossibly low.

What do you see happening in the future in terms of technology and keyboards?

I would imagine that computer technology and synthesizers are going to be wed to a point where the possibilities of

timbres and interactions and simultaneous triggerings of different sounds and keyboards is going to get more elegant. That's something I'm really looking forward to.

Do you think it's going to turn into a pipe organ kind of technology where two keyboards will trigger nine different instruments or sounds?

I think that'll be available for those who want it. I guess there's some of that going on already where some artists who are on the road a lot have some sort of master keyboard with some programmer sitting off-stage which assigns what that master keyboard is going to control. I think they'll probably eventually come up with a really good electric piano that sounds like a grand piano. I think the Yamaha CP-70 is the closest yet, but it has some problems in the lower register that they'll have to lick somehow. It's not just tuning problems either. Somehow the instrument sounds to me like a weird electric piano instead of a grand. They ought to be able to lick that.

What do you do to amplify your keyboards live?

For concerts I use a really hi-fi setup. When I started playing I tried using the typical rock amps but I could never get the sound quality from them that I wanted. I've had no trouble with the system I'm using for eight years. I come out of my keyboards and go into a couple of Shure mixers, which are a little noisy, but they're okay. That goes into a Marantz stereo preamp and Marantz power amplifiers, and then into two Klipsch enclosures. That's adequate for a 600-person auditorium.

What kind of effects pedals do you use?

Just the typical things. Every keyboard has a potential of being wah-wahed, fuzzed, or vumed. Those are the main pedal tricks. Then I've got some phase-shifting, reverb, echo, disc delay, flanging, ring modulation . . . I've also got a couple of voltage pedals from Steiner Parker [now just Steiner]. I use those for control on the synthesizers. They have built-in LFOs too.

Do you treat the Rhodes electric piano differently from your Steinway grand in terms of how you voice chords?

Things get muddy pretty quickly on the Rhodes if you're not careful, particularly in the lower register, so certain things that I love to do on an acoustic piano I wouldn't attempt on the Rhodes.

Do you ever blend psychology and music?

There've been a couple of times when

I've purposely tried to bring them together. Some years ago I did a 24-hour creativity marathon for Esalen Institute which was designed not as a therapy experience but as an intense group experience. It was for people who didn't necessarily have any musical or artistic training. The idea was to liberate their creative potential by using various group experiences and videotape and dance and music. It was neat, but I didn't feel like rushing into doing anything like that on a large scale. You know, music therapy is an established field now, but it applies more to in-patients. I do mostly out-patient work, so it doesn't apply. To be a good psychiatrist and a good musician you have to be able to listen well, so if I'm getting heavily into one of those fields I'm helping the other. I know I would never be totally satisfied doing just one of those things. Even if I were independently wealthy, I would keep doing what I'm doing.

What do you do about practicing music?

I don't practice often as such. I usually play. If I'm in the mood to sort of practice and work on technical things—if I'm improvising and something comes up that's hard for me to do—then I'll work on that kind of motif for a while, or do a series of left-hand figures and be really ruthless with myself about it. I've never had the interest or the temperament to sit down and play scales or parallel this or that. I think what helped me technically when I was growing up is that I was hungry to play certain music that would yield sounds and timbres that I wanted to hear. I would typically grab stuff that was technically beyond me and just play it so that I could hear what it was. That was worth playing scales for hours so I could hear what tunes like that were all about.

Did you do anything in particular in learning to play in odd meters?

Mostly just doing it. I was always interested in odd meters. I think very early on I did some stuff making tape loops to hear things played over and over again. And there were some metronomes that came out years ago that would let you hear polyrhythms. They were called Tri-nomes. But it was mostly getting it together with a group and a drummer that would work out things so they would keep recycling. You could improvise in such a way that you weren't just playing packets of 7. You have to feel 7 and hear 7, but you have to play over and through the bar line. It's like pulling rubber bands. I think in terms of tension and release when

I'm playing, even between the two hands. I like things to pull and wrench and to be asymmetrical yet lyrical and flowing at the same time. I like to have that feeling of independence.

Do you think in terms of drama at all?

I don't conceptualize it that way. Playing music is an intensely emotional experience for me, but it's hard to categorize what those emotions are about. Sometimes I have synaesthetic experiences when I play. I almost always do, in fact. Music turns into colors and sometimes tastes and smells. I get into a delicious state of consciousness when I'm really embedded in the music. I don't know where I am. It feels almost as if I'm some sort of vehicle for the music. It's like I'm totally passive, staying out of the music's way.

You did some work for Sesame Street.

It was a one-time thing. A local production company had contracted to do some things with numbers and we did a little fast bossa nova ditty. Grace Slick came in and overdubbed the vocals in a high squeaky voice — 1, 2, 3, 4, 5, 6, 7, 8, 9, 10. It's played forever. It's funny, I still get royalties out of it, and I've never even seen it.

How long does it take for you to get an album together?

It depends. Syzygy didn't take very long. *Expansion* took longer because we did it in the dead heat of summer before the studio was air-conditioned. We would play for ten minutes and explode outside dripping wet. The Columbia albums were typically done in one or two sessions.

How much time are you able to set aside for music on a regular basis?

It varies. Several days might go by and I wouldn't go downstairs into my studio at all. Then I might go downstairs and play for six hours straight. If there's no current project percolating I might find myself playing less and then getting ready for a concert I would play every day for hours.

When you were diddling on the piano when you were two or three years old, did your parents do anything consciously to encourage you?

They took great delight in everything that I did. It was very genuine. It's so unfortunate that parents squash their children. It may not be out of malice or anything, but they often don't realize the importance of things and want to have certain of their neurotic needs met before they even think about the needs of their children. A lot of people die on the vine of creativity at a very early age. I was very fortunate. My parents were genuinely enthusiastic and delighted at my wanting to play. They went to New York once when I was young and instead of going to Broadway shows, they went to all these backdoor dives and got John Coltrane to sign his name on a napkin for me. They did stuff like that! It was tremendous how they fostered my interest. I was 14 years old and they'd let me have the car to drive down to the South Side of Chicago and come back at 5:00 A.M. They were extraordinarily trusting of me. I think my parents waited until the appropriate time to teach me to read notes; I was hungry to

read notes by that time. Meanwhile I'd been improvising for years. Another critical point in my development, where they could have sentenced me to a horrible life, was when my music teacher, a man of some renown, said, "Look, this boy could be a concert pianist." My folks thought about it and said, "Yeah, but we know what that means in terms of how life would have to be scheduled. We don't want that for him. That's not what he wants in his life." I certainly wasn't mature enough to make that decision for myself, but my parents understood my personality enough to know that that was absolutely not for me. I never would have gone through with it. It would have torn me apart. □

**Denny Zeitlin:
A Selected Discography**

Cathexis, Columbia, CS 8982, out of print.
Carnival, Columbia, CS 9140, out of print.
Live At The Trident, Columbia, CS 9263, out of print.

Zeitgeist, Columbia, CS 9548.

Expansion, 1750 Arch, 1758.

Syzygy, 1750 Arch, 1759.

Invasion Of The Body Snatchers, United Artists, LA940-H.

Soundings, 1750 Arch, not yet released.

With Jeremy Steig:

Flute Fever, Columbia, CS 8936, out of print.