

The Trio Zeitgeist of Denny Zeitlin: New Release, Historic Reissue

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Buster Williams

Denny Zeitlin

Matt Wilson

Pianist/psychiatrist Denny Zeitlin has managed to balance two seemingly disparate careers for four decades. His large catalog of music is both inventive and enduring, suggesting an approach to therapy that prompts free association and creative, interactive problem solving. Performing and recording often in solo and duo formats, Zeitlin has always had a particular affinity for the trio of piano, bass and drums, which he describes as creating “an equilateral triangle of great flexibility, mutuality and stability.” These characteristics define his latest Sunnyside release, *In Concert*, as well as the simultaneously released retrospective from Mosaic, *Denny Zeitlin: The Columbia Trio Sessions*, amassed from his 1960s releases, *Cathexis*, *Carnival*, and *Zeitgeist*.

In the 1960s, Zeitlin’s trio included bassists Cecil McBee, Charlie Haden and Joe Halpin; his drumming cohorts included Freddie Waits, Jerry Granelli and Oliver Johnson. Personnel changed over the years, and in the late 90s he finally had the opportunity to record with the great bassist Buster Williams and acclaimed drummer Al Foster. Foster was no longer available a few years later when Zeitlin organized a West Coast tour, and a

friend recommended rising star Matt Wilson. The Zeitlin/Williams/Wilson trio proved to be a magical ensemble, releasing the praised Slickrock on MaxJazz in 2004. The live In Concert is a worthy successor.

In Concert (Sunnyside, 2009)

Three separate live sessions comprise In Concert: One track (“The We of Us”) in 2001 at the Jazz Bakery in Los Angeles; five tracks in 2004 at The Outpost Performance Space in Albuquerque; three tracks again at the Jazz Bakery in 2006, thus spanning the first five years of this trio as a working unit. And it is more than a working unit, more akin to a small dance company where each artist contributes to the total choreography, where mutual trust and respect allows each “dancer” the freedom to experiment knowing his partners will move in sync. For Zeitlin, the most extensive experiments address time and harmony, as if the basic philosophies of Monk and Brubeck have been filtered through the lyricism of Evans and Jarrett. Listening is enhanced by Zeitlin’s extensive notes on each track.

The first two compositions appear on CD as two-part works. Coltrane’s “Mr. PC” starts at a relatively fast pace. Williams takes a very brisk walk while Zeitlin creates tension in his phrases, both in speed and the direction of his runs, as if aboard a locomotive. Zeitlin describes this performance as a “relaxed intensity” but the intensity is so far flung that “relaxed” seems a tame description, in part due to Wilson’s furious pounding and clashing. Zeitlin’s long solo is based on blues forms that are ultimately set free in a shower of trills, doubles and triplets, and scalar climbs. The 24-bar minor blues evolves into 12 (now labeled part 2 with no real break) -- half the speed as well as half the form, more swing, less tense. Here the “relaxed intensity” descriptor is more fitting. Williams launches an extended solo reiterating his status as one of the most melodic of modern day bassists, his elongated tones creating their own source of tension and release. Wilson pushes it out with some thumpy patterns before Zeitlin cites the theme one last time.

Of the next pair of tracks, “The Night Has a Thousand Eyes/Ten Thousand Eyes,” Zeitlin notes that “I’ve reworked this piece so extensively, adding several new sections, that I announce it as ‘The Night Has 10,000 Eyes’ when we perform.” And the pianist reinvents the standard here, opening with a tinkling vamp section suggesting a universe of twinkling stars. His extended improvisation also throws the spotlight on the freewheeling inventiveness of Matt Wilson. The final section recapitulates the celestial tinklings of the beginning.

“The We of Us” is one of two Zeitlin compositions on the recording, written as an anniversary gift to wife, Josephine. A freely improvised solo begins this lovely track, Williams then filling with tones that resonate as if another there was another hand on the bass notes of the keyboard. The music is reverent, beautiful like a long-standing love, melodic with a faint swing. Wilson adds an elegant cymbal wash. The standard “All of You” offers delightful sequences of keyboard tumbles and improvised percussion and another standout solo from Williams before the theme emerges in the final segment. Zeitlin’s “Prime Times” cleverly refers to the composition’s rhythmic changes,

alternating 7/4 and 5/4 throughout. Williams and Wilson keep up with Zeitlin's shifts, which can be subtle or sudden. The latter section has a more serious syncopation (Wilson more dominant) and more harmonic excursions, finally resolving sweetly.

Four + solo minutes with Buster Williams? It's a "Bass Prelude" to the closing track ("Signs and Wonders"). Williams is himself one of the singular wonders of modern jazz, creating his own conversation through sustained notes, glissando, wide spaces, and multiple lines. (We can faintly hear a second line--tapping with his left hand?--that, given the live performance, is clearly not overdubbed.) He plucks, he zings, he flutters. He enchants. Zeitlin describes "Signs and Wonders" as his favorite David Friesen composition. Following Williams's exquisite prelude, the pianist launches first an ominous, single line intro of his own that builds to an explosion of sound and harmony. Conjuring dueling pianos with his single instrument, Zeitlin ventures off into a wonderland of rhythmic and harmonic twists and somersaults, while his cohorts, particularly Wilson, provide their own flipflops, everyone showering the track with a joyous energy and a touch of mystery.

Denny Zeitlin: The Columbia Studio Sessions. (Mosaic Select, 2009)

Mosaic's compilation of Denny Zeitlin's three sessions for Columbia takes the pianist back 45 years to his first outings heading his own trio, an amazing effort considering he was juggling the demands of medical school and internship during that period. When he recorded his first album as leader, he was still a medical student at Johns Hopkins University, having connected with the Manhattan jazz scene during a psychiatry fellowship at Columbia. Through Paul Winter, he was connected with bassist Cecil McBee and drummer Freddie Waits, and well as Columbia record producer John Hammond. The result was *Cathexis* (1964), which makes up the bulk of Mosaic's Disc One and includes Zeitlin's epic "Blue Phoenix." Already we hear Zeitlin's early muses—George Russell, Billy Taylor, Bill Evans and Ornette Coleman in his swing, his touch, his idiosyncratic interpretation of rhythm and harmony.

Disc Two covers all of *Carnival* (1964) and the 1966 session of *Zeitgeist*, both recorded on the West Coast where Zeitlin had relocated to serve an internship in San Francisco. Here he teamed with young Charlie Haden and Jerry Granelli, playing regular gigs at the Trident in Sausalito and other venues along the coast that furthered the pianist's considerations of odd time signatures and free improvisation, reinventing standards as well as extending his own book of original compositions. About half the tracks are original compositions, including the quirky circus title track, as well as a handful of reconfigured standards from Frank Laine, Kern and Hammerstein, Mercer and LeGrand. Disc Three completes the two *Zeitgeist* sessions, including the 1967 studio date with Joe Halpin replacing Charlie Haden, now based in New York, and Oliver Johnson replacing too-busy drummer Granelli. Again, half the tunes are from Zeitlin's pen, while covers include his reworkings of Andre Previn, Burke and Van Heusen, Gershwin, Cole Porter, Rodgers and Hart, and a multilayered "Maiden Voyage." An hour's worth of bonus material from each session, never released on LP, fills out each volume. With each CD,

in addition to the original liner notes, Zeitlin comments on the bonus material.

The notes, and the music, speak for themselves. Anyone already familiar with the current Denny Zeitlin Trio will be enthralled by the mature artistry and telepathic collaboration of these early sessions and how they build the foundation for Zeitlin's four+ decade quest "to be able to continue to evolve towards a personal music that looks to the future without being unmindful of the past; to find ways of making the elements of the vast musical universe compatible in my playing without becoming limited to any one stylistic 'bag'; and to communicate this music as honestly and effectively as I can to the interested listener." It's a quest that has taken Zeitlin and his various trios on a more or less straight trajectory skyward, from 1964's Cathexis to 2009's In Concert.