

MARIN INDEPENDENT JOURNAL NOVEMBER 9, 2009
KENTFIELD PSYCHIATRIST AND JAZZ PIANIST ZEITLIN, 71, HITS HIS MUSICAL PRIME

PAUL LIBERATORE
POSTED: 11/09/2009 09:03:29 PM PST



DENNY ZEITLIN, MARIN PSYCHIATRIST AND JAZZ PIANIST
SAYS HIS WORK AS A DOCTOR MAKES HIM A
GOOD MUSICIAN, AND VICE VERSA.
(PHOTO PROVIDED BY JOSEPHINE ZEITLIN)

When 71-year-old jazz pianist Denny Zeitlin sits down to play a solo concert, he instantly becomes a child again.

Playing solo, as he will Nov. 15 at the 142 Throckmorton Theatre in Mill Valley, takes him back to his earliest discovery of this wonderful thing called improvisational music.

"I first started in music by climbing up on the family Steinway when I was about 3 or 4 years old, and just letting my fingers wander over the keyboard," he recalled, warmed by the memory.

He remembers that his parents, both piano players, would often sit him on their laps when they'd play, taking him with them on his first musical excursions. He describes himself then as "a single explorer at the family Steinway."

"I would put my little hands on their hands and go along for the ride kinesthetically, to get a sense of what it was like to traverse the keyboard," he remembered. "Then I would be left on the bench all by myself to improvise. I began my life as a solo improviser."

Called one of "jazz's finest improvisers" by the Los Angeles Times, Zeitlin has recorded four solo albums in his 45-year career with a fifth, a live concert album on Sunnyside Records, coming out in the spring.

Last year, in celebration of his 70th birthday, the Mosaic label released a three-CD boxed set of Zeitlin's studio sessions for Columbia in the 1960s. And Sunnyside put out a live CD of his current trio with bassist Buster Williams and drummer Matt Wilson.

Allaboutjazz.com calls the trio CD "a powerful summation - for the moment - of Zeitlin's amazing career."

And reviewing the trio album in the Wall Street Journal, Doug Ramsey wrote that it "catches Dr. Zeitlin, at age 70, in his musical prime and his trio afire."

If you're wondering what that "doctor" business is all about, it isn't some hip jazz world nickname. Zeitlin, a longtime resident of Kentfield, is not only one of the finest jazz pianists of his generation, but he's also a clinical professor of psychiatry at the University of California, San Francisco, and a practicing psychiatrist with offices in Marin and San Francisco.

He says he's been able to rise to the top of both of his demanding careers because, he believes, being a psychiatrist helped him become a better musician, and vice versa. "There is a tremendous parallel in playing music and being a psychiatrist and doing psychotherapy," he said.

When he improvises, he tries to put himself in a psychological state in which, as he put it, "You are no longer someone sitting there and performing; you become pure music." A similar thing happens for him in psychotherapy when he's able, as he describes it, "to merge with the psychological life of my patient."

"When I'm doing my best psycho-therapeutic work, I'm able to feel my way into my patient's psychological state, to sense what they are describing," he explained. "There are strong challenges in doing psychotherapy, and music has helped me a lot with them."

After his early forays into improvisation, Zeitlin studied classical music as a teenager, but when he heard jazz, "I felt like I was shot out of a cannon," he said.

He began his performing career in the 1950s, playing in and around his native Chicago while still in medical school. After arriving in the Bay Area in 1964, he dropped out for a year to explore the new electronic keyboards and the synthesizer technology that was emerging then. He built his own electronic keyboard system that he said "looked like the cockpit of a 747." His three-year gig at the legendary Trident restaurant in Sausalito during that time is the stuff of local music legend.

"I withdrew from performing to integrate the world of electronic music, rock, funk and jazz - to bring it all together," he explained. "That's what I've always been - an integrationist. I've always said 'both and' (a reference to a famed San Francisco club of that name). I hate 'either or.'"

After his lab work with electronics, he returned to the acoustic piano, "aching to stretch its capabilities" and expanding the limits of his creativity as an improviser.

In his enduring career, he's recorded more than 30 albums and twice won first place in the Down Beat International Jazz Critics Poll.

Musicians of his caliber commonly play scores of concerts in a year, but Zeitlin limits his performances to weekends and smatterings of short stints playing festivals, concert halls and clubs. The Mill Valley concert is a rare local performance for him. "My main responsibility is to patient care and teaching," he said. "I don't do anything to disrupt that."

That said, Zeitlin is nevertheless as devoted to music now, after 4 1/2 decades at the keyboard, as he was sitting down at the family Steinway as a child. He approaches every concert with what Buddhists call "beginners' mind."

"My overall philosophy is of wanting to continue to grow and find new music, new ways to weave that into the fabric of my own personal life in a way that feels authentic to me and also carries my own personal stamp," he said. "And that's what I hope to continue doing. For me, music never gets old."

~ End ~