

STEVE KUHN

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Over a career of a half-century and counting, Steve Kuhn has earned renown as one of the most lyrical and affecting pianists in jazz, with an unfailingly beautiful touch and a sophisticated sense of swing. “Steve is an original stylist,” points out Dan Morgenstern, director of the Institute of Jazz Studies at Rutgers. “He’s one of the finest pianists out there today.” *Jazziz* magazine described Kuhn’s distinctive sound: “Few other pianists, regardless of genre, can tease such an evocative range of timbres from their instrument. Kuhn’s lower register is as dark and rich as Belgian chocolate, and his upper register has the light, translucent quality of ice-cold champagne.”

The highlights of Kuhn’s extensive discography include a justly acclaimed series of recordings for the art-house ECM label, his ever-fruitful relationship with founder-producer Manfred Eicher stretching back to the early ‘70s. Kuhn’s latest recording for ECM is *Wisteria*, released May 1, 2012; the album features the pianist playing his favorite Hamburg Steinway model D alongside two longtime partners: electric bassist Steve Swallow and drummer Joey Baron. Although Kuhn has collaborated with Swallow for more than 50 years and with Baron for more than 20, the three never played as a trio together until the sessions for *Wisteria* at Avatar Studios in Manhattan. The album’s wistful title number, written by Art Farmer, references the early-‘60s period when Kuhn and Swallow were in the trumpeter’s band together (although it happens to be an early Farmer tune that they never got to play with him). The pianist and bassist know each other’s playing intimately (“he’s the brother I never had,” Kuhn says), and the two share a love for melody – which *Wisteria* has in abundance. The album includes the lovely Brazilian “Romance” by Dori Caymmi and Carla Bley’s songful “Permanent Wave,” as well as such harder-driving winners as Kuhn’s tune-rich, bop-inflected “A Likely Story.”

As a composer, Kuhn’s songbook is one of quality rather than quantity. He has revisited many pieces repeatedly over the years, revealing their depth anew with each fresh interpretation, like gems held up to different light. *Wisteria* features several Kuhn compositions encoered from his shimmering 2004 orchestral collection *Promises Kept*, with the new versions of “Promises Kept,” “Adagio,” “Morning Dew” and “Pastorale” still yearning emotively even as they swing with subtle vigor. “I took it as a challenge to reinterpret these songs after *Promises Kept*, so we put some tempo on them and elaborated things with extra tags and so on,” Kuhn says. “But the music felt like it played itself. There was nothing to prove to each other or anyone else – we just played the music as it felt right to us, with a lot of interplay and affection. What was captured reflects where we are in our lives, really.”

Kuhn was born in Brooklyn in 1938 to parents who were immigrants from Hungary. As a small boy, Kuhn was so fascinated by the jazz records his father would play that the tyke began putting the 78s on the Victrola himself. It was soon apparent that the youngster had perfect pitch as well as a photographic memory, so piano lessons started at age 5. When the family moved to Boston, Kuhn’s parents sought out famed pedagogue Margaret Chaloff, who specialized in the Russian school of piano-playing that produced the likes of Rachmaninoff and Horowitz. Madame Chaloff became a surrogate mother, teacher and guru to Kuhn. He credits her instruction for his strong, even tone production and much else about his classically formed technique, but in particular his ability for “getting a good sound out of a piano, even a mediocre piano,” he says. “As a jazz musician on the road, that’s an indispensable talent.” As a teenage fan of Duke Ellington, Fats Waller, Charlie Parker, Bud

Powell and, above all, Art Tatum, he also began playing with his piano teacher's son, the jazz baritone saxophone player Serge Chaloff. With him as a formative, relentless guide, Kuhn got his trial by fire playing Boston clubs – by age 13. It was a heady youth, but Kuhn eventually attended Harvard University. "I'm amazed that I graduated," he recalls. "I had a trio with Arnold Wise and Chuck Israels, and we worked six nights a week at a club in Harvard Square, so I stayed out late and missed a lot of classes. But I was able to work with a lot of the horn players who came through Boston, from Coleman Hawkins to Chet Baker."

After Harvard, Kuhn attended the Lenox School of Music for famous sessions alongside such fellow students as Ornette Coleman and Don Cherry, with the faculty including the likes of Gunther Schuller, George Russell, John Lewis and Bill Evans, a sort of kindred musical spirit at that point. "It was a three-week hang, basically, and we hardly slept – it was head-spinning," Kuhn recalls. "The encyclopedic knowledge of someone like Gunther Schuller was astounding, as was his utter devotion to music, a kind of devotion that I would see later in John Coltrane. It was both daunting and inspiring." While at Lenox, Kuhn met trumpeter Kenny Dorham, who drafted the pianist for a yearlong stint in his band. "Kenny opened my ears and eyes, as well as a lot of doors," Kuhn says. He left Dorham's group in 1960 to join a new quartet being formed by Coltrane – and that was another enduring experience, even if it was only for eight weeks, as Kuhn played in the saxophonist's band for a run at the old Jazz Gallery on St. Mark's Place in New York's East Village. The pianist was only 21. "We played six nights a week, and the place was always packed," he recalls. "It was just incredible the way people would rise during one of Coltrane's solos, as if they were in a church revival meeting. I was just finding my way, trying different things – laying out sometimes while he improvised, comping other times. Coltrane was only in his mid-30s, but he might as well have been a million years older than I was, he was on such another level. I asked him if there was anything he wanted me to do that I wasn't doing or anything that I was doing that he'd rather I not, and he said, 'I have too much respect for you as a musician to tell you how to play.'"

Kuhn would go on to join saxophonist Stan Getz ("a complicated person," Kuhn says, "but I learned a lot listening in that band"), with one of the groups over the two-year period including Scott LaFaro and Roy Haynes. After a year in Art Farmer's band featuring Swallow and drummer Pete LaRoca, Kuhn formed his own trio with Swallow and LaRoca, with whom he made the album *Three Waves* for the Contact label. In 1966, the pianist teamed with another fellow Lenox student, vibraphonist-composer Gary McFarland, to follow through on the Third Stream ideas – jazz improvisation and classical forms intermingled – that they had absorbed at the sessions with Schuller. In 1966, McFarland and Kuhn recorded a landmark cross-genre LP for Impulse titled *The October Suite*, an album of McFarland's chamber compositions with Kuhn as soloist that would make a big impact on Manfred Eicher and his nascent ideas for ECM. At the close of the '60s, Kuhn followed his heart to Sweden, where he lived with a singer-actress for four years and began collaborating with European musicians (including future ECM stalwarts bassist Palle Danielsson and drummer Jon Christensen), the pianist's lyrical sound making an impact on a generation of Scandinavian players.

After returning to the U.S. with the invaluable experience of living and working in another culture, Kuhn began his relationship with Eicher, recording the album *Trance* in New York in 1974. During the mixing sessions for that LP in Oslo, Eicher had the idea of using available studio time to have Kuhn record a solo album with barely a day's notice. The result was *Ecstasy*, which ranks alongside other early-'70s LPs by Keith Jarrett, Paul Bley and Chick Corea in re-establishing the piano as a vehicle for solo improvisation. "A solo record was the furthest thing from my mind, so I didn't sleep the night before," Kuhn remembers. "I had only done a few solo concerts, so I had to come up with a point of view quickly." *Ecstasy*, recorded in just three hours of mostly first takes, yielded melody-steeped pieces that Kuhn has continued to reinterpret to this day, including "Silver" and "Life's Backward Glance."

The album was reissued in a boxed set in 2008 titled *Life's Backward Glances* along with two other '70s-era ECM albums, *Motility* (featuring a quartet) and *Playground* (with Sheila Jordan singing Kuhn's tunes fitted with his own lyrics).

In the mid-'80s, Kuhn founded a trio with bassist Ron Carter and drummer Al Foster that recorded a set of albums live at the Village Vanguard. In 2006, the three reunited to record *Live at Birdland* for Blue Note, a disc that mixed such standards as "If I Were a Bell" and "Stella by Starlight" with Fats Waller's "Jitterbug Waltz," Charlie Parker's "Confirmation" and Kenny Dorham's "Lotus Blossom," not to mention two intricate, high-energy Kuhn originals. And reflecting Kuhn's love of both the French Impressionist composers and Ellingtonia, the album includes a beautiful blending of Debussy's "La Plus Que Lente" with Billy Strayhorn's "Passion Flower." *All Music Guide* declared the music-making "imaginative and dexterous," while *The Lamp* called the album "an aural masterpiece." The U.K.'s *Guardian* newspaper pointed out: "Unlike many of his generation, who take a right-handed approach, Kuhn dominates the whole instrument: His left hand is as creatively active as the right; his notes are polished and pin-sharp; the ideas tumble freely, yet remain coherent as a composition." The pianist himself says about those two nights of improvisation: "It turned out to be a special recording for me. We are all of an age and have so many common musical experiences. We didn't rehearse beforehand – we just went in and did it. The three of us had mellowed over the years, but there's still an intensity to the record, with unexpected twists and turns."

From the late '80s through the 2000s, Kuhn has toured and recorded most often in his favored trio format, with such bassists as Ron Carter, David Finck, Eddie Gomez, George Mraz, Harvey S and Buster Williams joining him for various projects alongside drummers Joey Baron, Billy Drummond, Al Foster, Bob Moses, Lewis Nash, Bill Stewart and Kenny Washington. The past two decades have seen Kuhn record energetically, adding to his catalog with such releases as *Mostly Ballads* (New World, 1986), *Remembering Tomorrow* (ECM, 1996) and *Pastorale* (Sunny Side, 2007). He has made a dozen recent albums for the Venus label, ranging from the standards-oriented *Love Walked In* to a disc of embroidered classical themes, *Pavane for a Dead Princess*. (Ravel, composer of the *Pavane*, is Kuhn's classical favorite, he says: "He was an incredible orchestrator, of course, but really, it's that his melodies touch my heart.") In 2003, Kuhn performed in a live re-creation of *The October Suite* arrangements at Claremont McKenna College in California, with the concerts recorded but not yet released.

Invoking ideas from *The October Suite*, the 2004 ECM album *Promises Kept* saw Kuhn reinterpret highpoints from his songbook with a string orchestra – "a life's dream," he says. With Carlos Franzetti's arrangements and Finck on double-bass, Kuhn re-imagined such pieces as "Life's Backward Glance," "Trance," "Lullaby," "Oceans in the Sky" and "Pastorale." The result, according to *All About Jazz*, had "an air of romance and intrigue." In his liner notes to the album, Bob Blumenthal put it this way: "Kuhn has long had a capacity for creating indelible melodic notions and developing them with a sure sense of drama and unpredictable logic. His compositions rarely unfold with symmetrical regularity; like streams seeking their own course, they twist and surge, gaining emotional power in their turns from quiet reflection to bold passion." Having revisited signposts from across five decades of his career as a musician – and dedicated the result to the immigrant parents who made life in a free society possible – Kuhn insisted *Promises Kept* was "all about emotion."

In 2009, Kuhn investigated another aspect of his past with *Mostly Coltrane*, one of his most widely praised albums. The ECM release saw the pianist team with saxophonist Joe Lovano and the rhythm section of Finck and Baron. Kuhn and company interpreted tunes that the pianist played with Coltrane back in 1960, such as "The Night Has a Thousand Eyes," "Like Sonny" and "I Want to Talk About You," but also more exploratory music from later in the

saxophonist's career, like "Welcome," "Spiritual" and "Living Space." *The Village Voice* said that *Mostly Coltrane* "manages to glisten with spirit while throwing some punches." And *The New York Times* called Kuhn's delving into Coltrane's later periods "awesomely counterintuitive," his ability to sound like himself in music made famous by very different pianists – McCoy Tyner and Alice Coltrane – reflecting the fact that "he can play John Coltrane's music meaningfully without sounding as if he lives by it." According to Kuhn, "The album simply reflects my deep respect for John Coltrane and the religious devotion he had to the music. If he wasn't sleeping or eating, he had that horn in his mouth. And whenever he'd see me, he'd ask: 'What's new?' He knew I was into contemporary classical music, and he wanted to know about Messiaen and Xenakis or whomever. He was a seeker, and so disciplined. He was, and still is, such an inspiring figure."

As Kuhn continues to refine his sense of harmonic and rhythmic subtlety, his gift for melodic beauty and his high ideal of collective interplay, he tours throughout the world, with a strong following in Europe and especially Japan, where his albums frequently appear high on the jazz charts. He will be performing extensively on behalf of *Wisteria*, from New York City's Birdland to venues far beyond. More than ever, he aims to make every note count. Kuhn had open-heart surgery a decade ago, and that brings an acute sense of one's mortality. With this in mind, he says: "Music is all about conveying feelings to people. Whether it's poignancy or elation, I'm going for the visceral response. For me, touching the heart is the bottom line."

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