

As he approaches 75, Steve Kuhn reflects on his life as an unassuming—and surprisingly neglected—giant of jazz piano

by David R. Adler

REMEMBERING TOMORROW

After Hurricane Sandy hit New York, the jazz clubs south of 34th Street were shut down for days. The power returned in time for the weekend, but pianist Steve Kuhn had already lost two nights of a four-night run at Jazz Standard. “Do you all have cabin fever?” he asked the crowd when he finally appeared on Saturday, backed by bassist Buster Williams and drummer Billy Drummond.

The trio led off swinging with “The Best Things in Life Are Free,” a song about our shared humanity (“Flowers in spring/The robins that sing/The sunbeams that shine/They’re yours and they’re mine”). To conclude, Kuhn chose one of his grandest, most distinctive compositions, “Oceans in the Sky”—not a bad way to describe a hurricane, when you think about it.

The following night Kuhn opened fast with Tadd Dameron’s “Super Jet.” He showcased two originals, “Chalet” and “Adagio,” from his latest ECM disc, *Wisteria*. He played “Yesterday’s Gardenias,” an obscure gem that goes back to his teenage days with baritone sax legend Serge Chaloff (it can be heard on *Life’s Magic*, recorded at the Village Vanguard in 1986 and reissued by Sunnyside in 2012). The farewell number was Sonny Rollins’ “Airegin,” with a solo intro that referenced everything from Bobby Hebb’s “Sunny” to Dizzy Gillespie’s “Be-Bop” and “Tin Tin Deo.”

There was intense passion but also effortlessness in what Kuhn played. His hands stayed close to the keys, tightly coordinated and efficient, yet his sound was huge. The music invited risk, though it was firmly anchored in the postbop tradition that has been part of Kuhn’s DNA since he moved to New York in 1959. Bassist David Finck cites a comment on Kuhn he heard from vibraphonist Joe Locke some years ago: “I don’t think there are many people who can swing that hard for that long.”

Indeed, a scant few pianists can look back on formative years working with the likes of Kenny Dorham, Stan Getz, Art Farmer and—for eight momentous weeks in 1960—John Coltrane. “This guy is the most underrated piano player goin’,” argues vocalist Sheila Jordan, a longtime friend and collaborator, a few days before celebrating her 84th birthday in a duo with Kuhn at the Blue Note. “I say this constantly: Why he is not up there with all of these guys making it big time I’ll never understand. This guy doesn’t even get mentioned in the critics’ polls.”

“I don’t have the big name that Herbie [Hancock] or Chick [Corea] or Keith [Jarrett] has,” offers Kuhn, seated in the listening room of his home in suburban Dobbs Ferry, N.Y. “I got past that years ago. It used to piss me off but it’s not worth the agita. I’m going to be 75 years old.” With a world-weary grin, he adds: “I’m happy with whatever comes along.”

IN A 1941 BOOK OF HUMOROUS PROFILES CALLED *Low Man on a Totem Pole*, journalist H. Allen Smith wrote about traveling to “deepest Brooklyn” to visit the family of little Stephen Lewis Kuhn, born in 1938: “[H]e was two and a half years old and he lived on Avenue X. . . . His mother [Stella] is a physical-education teacher in the public schools, and his father [Carl] is a buyer of hides. . . . [Stephen] was a chubby youngster and, though he could neither read nor write (he couldn’t talk any too well), he appeared to know more about swing music than the head usher at the Paramount Theater.”

The account goes on: “At sixteen months [Stephen] could sing ‘Begin the Beguine,’ ‘Hold Tight,’ and ‘Pony Boy.’ By this time he was already disc-daffy.” Echoing Smith’s narrative, Kuhn says: “My folks told me I would not go to sleep at night unless one of them picked me up and danced to Benny Goodman’s ‘Pick-a-Rib,’ parts one and two. I’m sure I still have the record here. By the time the first side was over I’d be sleeping. But I’d throw a tantrum if that didn’t happen.”

At the end of the chapter, Smith asks Kuhn’s mother, “Where do you think it will all lead?” She answers, “I really don’t know. He has always been an unusual child. He doesn’t like candy but simply adores cod-liver oil.”

Kuhn began playing piano at age 5. Gifted with perfect pitch and a steel-trap memory, he took classical lessons but gravitated toward improvisation right away. “I was bored by reading the music the same way every time,” he says. “If I had a good lesson, the teachers would give me boogie-woogie pieces to play.”

Kuhn’s family relocated to Chicago in 1947, when he was 9. In 1950 his father took another job in Boston, and that’s where Kuhn came of age. “In Boston I really got serious. I started studying with Margaret Chaloff when I was 13.” Madame Chaloff also taught her famed “Russian technique” to Herbie Hancock, Kenny Werner and other major jazz pianists.

▼ **Trio Masters:** Kuhn and Bill Evans in December 1971



COURTESY OF THE ARTIST

By 13 Kuhn was taking paid gigs, working school dances and other events. In time he was performing steadily with Serge Chaloff, Madame Chaloff's well-known but troubled son, who never hesitated to curse Kuhn out on the bandstand. Kuhn grew a thick skin, and he learned every lesson. "When I graduated from high school, I wanted to come to New York," Kuhn explains. "But my parents, to their credit I must say, insisted that I go to college. Harvard accepted me and I enrolled. I gained a lot in terms of maturity. If I'd come straight to New York at 17 I would have gotten into more trouble than I did when I was 21."

Kuhn graduated Harvard in 1959 with a low B average, "which was amazing considering I was working almost every night," he says. "I had a trio with [bassist] Chuck Israels and [drummer] Arnold Wise. We worked at a club in Harvard Square five or six nights a week, to the point where I was missing morning classes. We also worked as a rhythm section for different horn players who would come through town—Coleman Hawkins, Vic Dickenson, Chet Baker, Don Elliott." The three jokingly called their group the MJT, the Modern Jewish Trio.

Following graduation Kuhn attended the short-lived Lenox School of Jazz in August of '59, studying with the likes of Gunther Schuller and George Russell and performing with two then-obscure fellow students, Ornette Coleman and Don Cherry. Then Kuhn made the move to New York. He met bassist Scott LaFaro and drummer Pete La Roca (Sims) and played with them, together and separately, in many different contexts. La Roca, who died of cancer during the writing of this story, joined Kuhn as a sideman in bands led by Stan Getz, Art Farmer and John Coltrane. LaFaro, a Getz quartet member as well, died tragically in a car accident in July 1961. "It was the first significant death in my life," Kuhn says, "something that has really impacted me to this day."

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TRUMPET GREAT KENNY DORHAM, A LENOX SCHOOL FACULTY member, was in New York and looking for a pianist when Kuhn called. Kuhn took the spot and made his recording debut on Dorham's 1960 Time label release *Jazz Contemporary*. "Kenny was a wonderful player and composer," says Kuhn, "and he sang, too—there's an LP of him singing [*This Is the Moment!*, 1958]. He helped me a lot in terms of voicing chords in certain parts of tunes. He was a sweetheart, too easygoing for his own sake. He had no business sense whatsoever. I was the only Caucasian in the band and he knew I was Jewish, so he used to call me Bloomberg. 'Bloomberg, I'm gonna give you the payroll every week. I want you to pay the guys.' I was the paymaster."

Boldly, Kuhn placed another call as well, to John Coltrane. He introduced himself as Dorham's pianist and asked if they could meet and talk music. Coltrane agreed, and they met at a studio in midtown near the Bryant Hotel, where Kuhn was living. In a week or two Coltrane invited Kuhn to his home in Hollis, Queens. Naima, Coltrane's wife, cooked them dinner, and Coltrane drove Kuhn back to Manhattan. Another week or two passed before Coltrane called and offered Kuhn a gig at \$135 per week, an improvement over Dorham's \$100.

Historian Lewis Porter, in *John Coltrane: His Life and Music*, goes over this period in some detail. Coltrane took an extended quartet engagement at the Jazz Gallery, sister club of the Five Spot, and was hoping to assemble a dream lineup with McCoy Tyner, Art Davis and Elvin Jones. All were unavailable. Kuhn didn't know it at the time, but he was keeping the bench warm until Tyner could leave the Benny Golson-Art Farmer Jazztet. Nonetheless, he worked with Coltrane for roughly eight weeks, six nights a week, at least three sets a night, playing material from *Giant Steps* and other important recordings. Steve Davis played bass and Pete La Roca played drums.

"Giant Steps' was always hard for me to play," says Kuhn of Coltrane's notoriously demanding chord sequence. "But he was also playing songs like 'So What' [with minimal chord changes], so he was on the fence. I was 21, and I didn't quite know what to do behind him. Sometimes I'd comp, sometimes I would get out there with him while he was improvising and I would do stuff. When I heard McCoy later, he essentially comped and laid the carpet down, and that's really what [Coltrane] was looking for." Kuhn remembers "a lot of backlash in the black community about having a white guy in the band," but that wasn't the

CRUCIAL KUHN

THOMAS CONRAD SELECTS HIGHLIGHTS FROM STEVE KUHN'S EXTENSIVE DISCOGRAPHY

Life's Backward Glances (ECM, 2009)



This remastered three-CD set, with three long-out-of-print ECM albums from the '70s, is a bargain but not perfect. Sheila Jordan's voice is buried in the mix on *Playground*.

Motility, with Steve Slagle's shrieking saxophones, is a challenging work even for open-minded listeners. But the collection displays the range of Kuhn's early interests, and *Ecstasy* is a lost classic. It belongs with early ECM improvised solo-piano masterworks by Jarrett, Corea and Bley.

Quiéreme Mucho (Sunnyside, 2005)



Kuhn has made more than 10 valuable recordings on the Japanese Venus label, a vast jazz-piano repository. *Quiéreme Mucho*, recorded in 2000 and reissued on Sunnyside, is not exactly his Spanish album. All the tunes are staples of the Latin American songbook, but Kuhn reimagines them on his own North American terms. "Andalucia" ("The Breeze and I") becomes hard, angular bop. The bittersweet ballad "Bésame Mucho" becomes quick and witty.

Pastorale (Sunnyside, 2007)



Another Venus recording, from 2002, reissued on Sunnyside. Kuhn has always employed the best bassists and drummers in his trios. Here he provides full creative parity to Eddie Gomez and Billy Drummond. Kuhn is many kinds of piano player, but his dominant mode is intellectual romanticism. Michel Legrand's "Once Upon a Summertime," marked out so patiently, in intermittent flickerings of emotion, is perfectly objectified yearning.

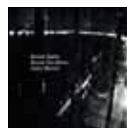
Promises Kept (ECM, 2004)



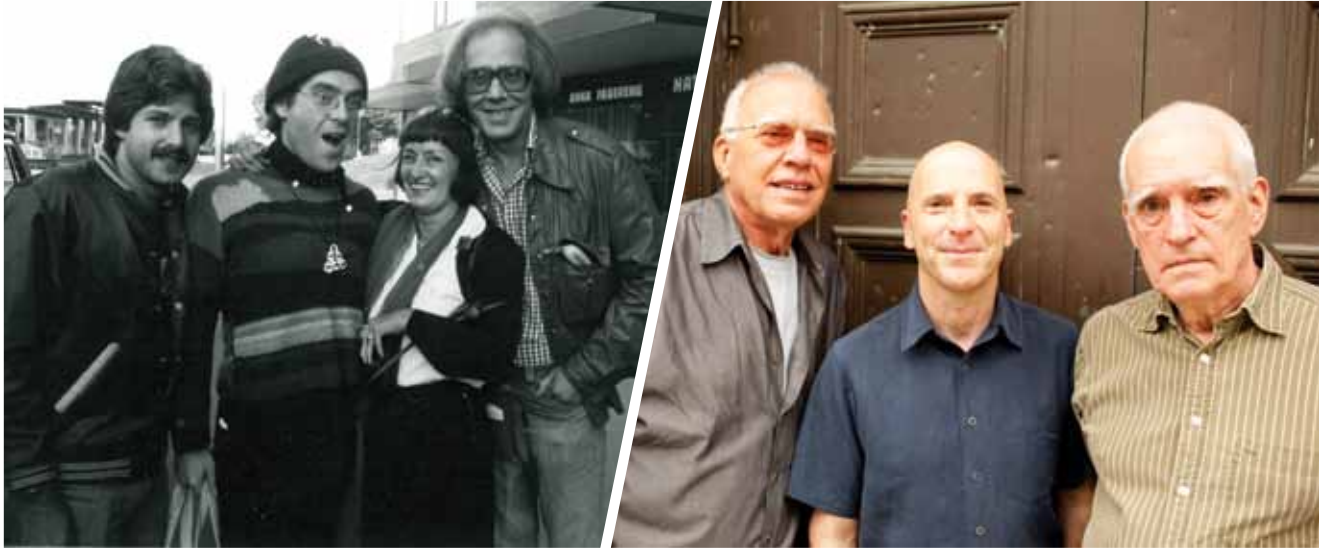
If you only own one Kuhn album (which would be a pity), make it this one, even though it is an anomaly, his only recording with large string ensemble. The orchestrations by

Carlos Franzetti and Kuhn somehow create the illusion that 15 stringed instruments are responding in real time to a piano's improvised soaring flights and quietest probings. *Promises Kept*, recorded in 2002, is required listening for anyone who thinks strings cannot work organically in a jazz context.

Wisteria (ECM, 2012)



Wisteria, recorded in September 2011, proves several things: that, after a professional career now approaching 60 years, Steve Kuhn still has the goods; that he should have assembled this new trio, with poetic bassist Steve Swallow and orchestral drummer Joey Baron, sooner; that he is an underappreciated composer of indelible melodic forms like "Pastorale" and "Promises Kept"; and that he is, to a rare degree, a complete pianist.



▲ Left: Harvie S, Bob Moses, Sheila Jordan and Kuhn (from left) in 1980 Right: Kuhn, Joey Baron and Steve Swallow (from left) in 2011

reason Trane and Kuhn parted ways.

In the years leading up to Kuhn's 2009 *Mostly Coltrane* session, he and Joe Lovano would join forces at Birdland for shows in honor of Coltrane's birthday. "Steve had some lead sheets and music in Coltrane's hand," Lovano says, "and we played some of those tunes. I know he had 'I Want to Talk About You.'" (Kuhn's copy of "Mr. Syms," in Trane's hand, is reproduced on page 189 of Porter's book. The title, Porter explains, is not a reference to La Roca.) "What made it nice," Lovano continues, "is that Steve didn't play like McCoy, and Joey Baron didn't play like Elvin. We were trying to create music within those pieces and play from our personal histories."

Kuhn's time with Stan Getz was intermittent. First LaFaro and La Roca were in the group, then Roy Haynes came in, then Boston bassist John Neves after LaFaro's death. According to Kuhn, the rhythm section sounded so good that Getz feared being upstaged: "Stan's words were, 'This band is gonna *disband*.' [But] after seven or eight months, he called me again and I worked with him for another year, with Tommy Williams on bass and Al Harewood on drums."

Asked for a comment on Art Farmer, Kuhn reflects: "Arthur? 'The Chief.' He was a beautiful player. Pete and Steve Swallow were in the band so we really had a good time." "Wisteria," the title track of Kuhn's recent ECM disc, is Farmer's tune. "We never played it when we were with him," Kuhn says. "He recorded it back in 1954, and I always remembered it, a simple beautiful ballad."

In the midst of all this high-profile work, as the song goes, love walked in. Kuhn met Monica Zetterlund, the acclaimed singer and actress, and moved to Sweden to be with her in 1967. The relationship was ill fated, however, and Kuhn returned to the States in 1971.

He nursed his wounds and started rebuilding his livelihood back in New York. Bill Evans, a mentor and big brother figure, lent him a Rhodes. "I wound up doing a lot of commercial work, jingles, playing dances and parties," Kuhn recalls. But good news came: Manfred Eicher of ECM, impressed by Kuhn's work on Gary McFarland's knotty chamber-jazz opus on Impulse!, *The October Suite*, enlisted Kuhn for *Trance*, which led to a solo piano album, then the formation of Kuhn's band Ecstasy (with Steve Slagle on alto sax and flute), then a celebrated quartet with Sheila Jordan and bassist Harvie Swartz (now Harvie S), and everything since.

KUHN IS A SURVIVOR, AND NOT A MAN WHO CAN BE

figured out on the first try. He's serious about his art, although drummer and friend Rakalam Bob Moses describes him as "a punster, always prone to musical jokes." Bassist Steve Swallow, e-mailing from the road, recalled first meeting Kuhn around 1960: "I thought he was repressed and scholarly. Then I heard him play."

Early in their friendship, when Swallow was between homes, Kuhn took him in for a period of time. Eventually the two became as close as brothers. "I did everything I could to avoid disturbing the near-perfect order in which [Kuhn] lived," Swallow recalls. "His breakfast routine was a marvel of timing: The bacon went into the pan at a precise moment; the eggs were next; the bread was into the toaster precisely next. They all made it onto his plate at the exact moment they were all perfectly cooked. He'd then eat in satisfied silence."

Today Kuhn is in a long-term relationship but lives alone. He's private and introverted but kind, sociable in his way (on gigs he talks to the audience after nearly every tune). His home is modest and immaculate, with a seven-foot Baldwin piano and a sweet array of audiophile gear. Does he practice every day? "No," Kuhn says. "Same with my writing. I don't have that discipline. When I have a project to do or I'm working, I'll sit down and move my fingers."

It was Swallow who first urged Kuhn to get serious about composing. "I'm not sure why," the bassist remarks, "but he's reluctant to put pen to paper. I consider it a mission in my life to prod him to action." Although Kuhn never became prolific, he responded to Swallow's entreaties with a collection of tunes that are still central to his oeuvre. "Lullaby," "Trance," "Deep Tango," "Life's Backward Glance," "Tomorrow's Son," "The Rain Forest," "Remembering Tomorrow," "Poem for #15," "The Zoo": These and others are remarkable for their melodic clarity and beauty, and Kuhn has revisited them many times live and on record. They're his own personal standards, you could say, an addition to the warehouse of Great American Songbook material he keeps in his mind.

Not only did Kuhn write tunes; he also wrote lyrics—quite unusual for a jazz instrumentalist. The words range from pain and heartbreak to outlandish non-sequiturs and streams of consciousness ("send 20 dollars to me so that I can be free to see how birds eat their food in the trees"). They've been interpreted on record by Sheila Jordan, Norwegian vocalist Karin Krog and even Kuhn himself, on a hard-to-find Buddah date that's been repackaged by Sony as *Steve Kuhn: The Early '70s* (with Gary McFarland's arrangements).

Page through his discography and the facets of Kuhn's talent multiply. In 1966 he brought a crystalline touch to McFarland's *The October Suite* and another ambitious item in the Impulse! catalog, Oliver Nelson's *Sound Pieces*. Kuhn can be heard playing Fender Rhodes on his ECM debut *Trance* as well as Karin Krog's offbeat 1974 album *We Could Be Flying*.

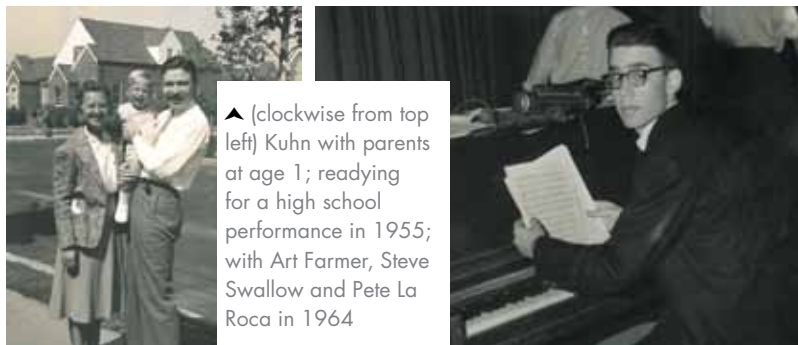
The spacious, lyrical side of Kuhn's work tends to fit ECM's aesthetic like a glove. But there's an avant-garde strain, too, in Kuhn's background—it surfaces on tracks from *Mostly Coltrane* such as "Configuration" and "Jimmy's Mode." His 1969 trio album *Childhood Is Forever*, Swallow's final session on upright bass before switching to electric, also has a certain "hell for leather" quality (in Swallow's words), even if the focus is standards. Kuhn is "always the wild card," in Swallow's estimation. "Perfectly correct, but off-the wall."

Remarkably, there is a recording of Kuhn playing "The Sphinx" and "Inn Tune" with Ornette Coleman and Don Cherry on the 1959 recording *The Lenox Jazz School Concert*. "I'd just lay out when they played," Kuhn shrugs. "John Lewis and Max Roach were our leaders, and John said to me, 'You don't have to play chords, play more linear, like I do behind Bags [vibraphonist Milt Jackson]. But I just assumed lay out.' In terms of soloing, it was 'forget about any chords and play,' Kuhn adds. "It was challenging, but another experience that opens your ears."

"Kuhn is a very reactive pianist," says Bob Moses, who played in Kuhn's '70s quartet and also enlisted him as a sideman. "He'll use what he gets," Moses continues. "In my case, I think I probably gave him too much [laughs]. I do think I got some of his wildest playing, because he'll respond to it." After many years apart, Moses and Kuhn recently reunited for a forthcoming release by guitarist Tisziji Muñoz, *Incomprehensibly Gone* (Anami). "This is probably some of the freest Kuhn [on record]," Moses comments. "Kuhn was brilliant—he was right there."

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KUHN'S MUSICAL HOME, HOWEVER, IS THE STRAIGHT-ahead trio, the focus of many of his nearly 50 recordings as a leader.



▲ (clockwise from top left) Kuhn with parents at age 1; readying for a high school performance in 1955; with Art Farmer, Steve Swallow and Pete La Roca in 1964



He is "not afraid to play some super-traditional stuff that comes right out of 1957-58 trio playing," according to bassist and trio regular David Finck. "Red Garland, Wynton Kelly, in that style. He's not afraid to play those songs. The fours that get traded, the accents that get thrown around, are pure bop and postbop language. But it's not done in a way like he's trying to recreate something."

Drummer Joey Baron, an associate of Kuhn's for 20 years running, makes a similar point when he recalls his Birdland gigs with Kuhn and Ron Carter in 2010: "They weren't trying to play the fashion of the day. They were playing the songs that they played when they first met back in '59 or whenever that was. To be playing songs like 'Four' with those guys, or 'There Is No Greater Love'—I can't tell you what a thrill that was. There aren't many people who can maintain that level of feeling. People touch on it, or they might peak to it, but to start there and keep it simmering—there's not many of them left."

Baron viewed Kuhn as a hero long before they met, in fact. "The record that affected me the most was *Watch What Happens* [1968, with drummer Jon Christensen and bassist Palle Danielsson]," he says. "I heard that when I was a kid in Richmond, Virginia. It was so expressive but still using the language of song forms, like an extension of bebop. The level of fire and lyricism on that recording was a major influence on what I value in music-making."

Taking a long view of the piano lineage, Joe Lovano says: "During the period when I was playing with Steve a lot, I was also playing with Hank Jones. Hank was the cat who bridged between Teddy Wilson and Nat Cole and Bud Powell, and the players in Steve's generation, they came off of Hank a lot." It's significant that Jones played with Kenny Dorham shortly before Kuhn did—and that Kuhn wrote liner notes for the 1997 Verve reissue of Jones' *Urbanity/Hank Jones Piano*.

Even if Kuhn doesn't dominate the jazz landscape, he's built a loyal and sizable audience and earned the highest regard of his peers. In July 2012 he was awarded the Prix Gabriel Fauré at the Festival Jazz à Foix in France. "We did the concert," he remembers, "and afterward the director grabs me by the arm, applause still going, pulls me out on the stage and hands me this bust of Gabriel Fauré. It really shocked the hell out of me. I got all ... [pantomimes tears falling from his eyes] ... which happens a lot these days."

Thinking back 30 years or more, Bob Moses details Kuhn's ability to create on the highest level no matter the circumstances: "Occasionally I would play wedding or bar mitzvah gigs with Kuhn. He was the king of that. I'll tell you something, playing a wedding gig with Kuhn was better than playing a jazz gig with almost anybody else. He used to do them on a Fender, and there was rarely a bass player. His left hand on the electric piano was better than 99 percent of any bass players you'd play with. He doesn't show this off, but he might be the best salsa and Latin pianist I ever heard. One night he played a version of 'What's Goin' On' and he sounded like the whole Motown revue by himself.

"That's a formula for success, but with Kuhn he would do it once and you'd never hear it again. It's how he felt at the moment. There was no calculation. A lot of pianists became more famous—and they're great, no doubt, but no greater than Kuhn. They had a certain thing that people liked and they made sure the people got that. That's not a judgment. But Kuhn doesn't play for that reason." **JT**