He's not a footnote anymore

By Chet Williamson

Pianist Steve Kuhn has lived the life of a footnote long enough. Now's the time to give the man his due. Relatively unknown outside of jazz circles - even after 40 years of playing - Kuhn is best known as the pianist who played in John Coltrane's first quartet. "Kuhn took some time recently to reflect about his career, talk about the presence of Coltrane and what lies ahead."

After Coltrane, Kuhn worked with Stan Getz and Art Farmer and many others. He has recorded more than 30 albums as a leader, and has been a sideman on many more. In the late '70s, Kuhn formed a quartet that was yet another important chapter in Kuhn's illustrious career.

The Steve Kuhn Quartet will appear in a rare reunion performance at 7 p.m. Sunday, Feb. 18, at Worcester Polytechnic Institute's Alden Hall. Besides Kuhn, the all-star group consists of vocalist Sheila Jordan, bassist Harvie Swartz and drummer Bob Moses. Kuhn will also conduct a workshop/clinic earlier in the day, at 3 p.m., at the same location.

It is difficult to trace the influences in Kuhn's piano playing. Although he is well-versed in schools from bebop to the present, he is devoid of cliches. You can almost hear him thinking, probing and challenging his intellect.

A consummate accompanist, Kuhn is impressive without drawing attention to himself. He will employ orchestral techniques such as counterpoint, ostinato figures and sweeping arpeggios. With a fondness for fractional time or no time signatures at all, Kuhn is radiant throughout. With a very impressionistic approach to harmony, Kuhn's effect is like a Monet painting of waterlilies - his colors are always moving, mixing and shimmering, but never muddy. And although he can swing with the best of them, he prefers to win you over with more subtle valentines, proving he is not just a mere footnote but a pianist for all seasons.