

Jazz Pianist Steve Kuhn' at WPI

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.

"I had a mild heart attack about three weeks ago. But I am OK," Kuhn said, speaking by phone from his home in Westchester, N.Y.

Born in New York City in 1938, Kuhn started playing piano at the age of 5. Kuhn graduated from Harvard University in 1959 where he studied with composer Walter Piston. That summer, Kuhn received a scholarship to the newly organized Lenox School of jazz.

"It was just this big three-week hang with jazz luminaries," Kuhn recalled. "This was the first year it happened. It included Omette Coleman, Don Cherry, Gary

McFarland, Freddie Hubbard. The whole Modern Jazz Quartet was there. Gunther Shuller, George Russell, Bill Evans and Kenny Dorham. So I met a number of people up there."

That fall, Kuhn moved to New York to pursue a career as a jazz musician.

"I checked into a seedy hotel on 54th Street," Kuhn said, laughing. "It was somewhat traumatic, but I really felt as though that is where I had to be."

A job with trumpeter Kenny Dorham gave Kuhn the confidence to approach Coltrane. "I knew that he was leaving Miles and looking to form a band, so I just called him out of the blue," Kuhn said, referring to Coltrane. "I said, 'I know you don't know who I am. I am currently working with Kenny Dorham and I would love to play with you sometime and maybe we could get together and rehearse.'"

Kuhn worked with Coltrane for three months and then was replaced by McCoy Tyner, whom Coltrane had been waiting for all along. "But the time I spent with John was very special to me. The electricity and the way the audience responded to him was incredible. It was like a revival meeting in church or something.

Amazing!"

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 clichés. 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 fig-

ures and sweeping arpeggios. With a fondness for fractional time or no time signatures at all, Kuhn will also slip into silence as part of his tonal palette.

On his latest Postcards disc, *Seasons of Romance*, 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.



Steve Kuhn

Music