

Steve Kuhn: Mostly Ballads
New World Records 80351-2

The fullness and clarity of the six solos and six duets that comprise *Mostly Ballads* set them apart from the typical encounter of post-Parker jazz musicians with "the tradition." Standard songs, once the improviser's training ground, fell out of favor in the sixties as jazz became freer on the one hand and more tolerant of rock on the other; far too many players viewed pop tunes merely as opportunities for broad comedy or rote displays of musicianship. But Steve Kuhn, a post-Parker improviser with a traditional jazz background, plays songs on *Mostly Ballads* like a man with nothing to prove, and those chosen for this recording have always held special meaning for him. Listeners who know Kuhn through his previous recordings will note that this is his first album devoted exclusively to standards by great American songwriters (with the exception of *Danny Boy*). With a renewed interest in this kind of material and with the formation of his critically acclaimed trio, featuring bassist Ron Carter and drummer Al Foster (see discography, *Life's Magic*), Kuhn may be entering one of the more expansive phases of his career.

Kuhn has gone through phases before, beginning at age five, when he made his lifelong commitment to the piano. Phase two, the student phase, opened eight years later, when the thirteen-year-old began studying with the legendary piano teacher Margaret Chaloff (mother of the baritone saxophonist Serge Chaloff), and leading trios in Boston nightclubs, accompanying the likes of Coleman Hawkins. This period would stretch through the fifties, and take Kuhn to Harvard (he was the first musician to play at Cambridge's famous Club 47 while in college) and the School of Jazz in Lenox, Massachusetts. By late 1959, Kuhn had moved to New York and entered his sideman phase, playing for extended periods with Kenny Dorham, John Coltrane (in the saxophonist's first quartet, before McCoy Tyner had joined), Stan Getz, and Art Farmer.

In 1967, Kuhn decided it was time to begin working for himself and focusing on his own compositions. Jazz standards and pop tunes were never abandoned entirely, but for the next decade and a half--through four years in Stockholm, then several years of solo, trio, and quartet work in New York--the balance had clearly shifted to originals. Even when the vocalist Sheila Jordan was a member of the pianist's quartet, the emphasis was on Kuhn's songs. Artists often have to make such choices in order to clear a space for their personal voice, to set themselves apart in the eyes of the public (and perhaps in their own eyes as well). If an artist is strong enough, if his voice proves in fact to be clear and distinct, he can make any material his own. Steve Kuhn did not necessarily need all this time to reach such a point, but as these dozen performances eloquently confirm, he is most certainly there.

The proof, quite simply, is that despite the familiarity of most of the present material, Steve Kuhn doesn't sound like anybody but himself. This is the highest form of praise for any jazz artist, especially one like Kuhn, who appreciates the history of both his instrument and his material. Every enduring song asks a question that cannot be answered by an artist with melody, chords, or harmony alone: the ability to play "inside" a song is what separates a masterful interpreter from someone who just plays on "the changes." To play the more familiar titles in this program, the *Body and Souls* and *How High the Moons*, is in a sense to have a score of illustrious predecessors looking over

your shoulder, a range of touches, voicings, and rhythmic ebbs and flows that all feed into a pianist's sound. For Kuhn, it is also to confront compositions with their own particular resonance, beyond the interpretation of any given musician. His renderings of these songs call up fresh ideas, expressed through personal techniques, and the results are not only illuminating but refreshing.

Take *'Round Midnight*, a piece that has been performed by every pianist this side of Cecil Taylor. No one would mistake this unaccompanied reading for that of any other pianist, including the co-composer-- though, like Thelonious Monk, Kuhn lets the melodic material determine the course of his improvisation. The rhythmic modulation on this track is exceptional, with momentum building through the first bridge to the break between choruses that launches a fiercely concentrated development section. Note how the bold left-hand figures that appeared earlier in the performance are joined with Monk's original coda for a dazzling climax; and how Kuhn blends these elements into the fabric of the song with utmost economy, making his statements within two choruses.

One of the joys of Kuhn's work here is his refusal to fall into patterns. Sometimes, as in *Two for the Road* and *Lonely Town*, he will give precedence to the melody, adding his own mark through changes in voicings or rhythmic displacements. Elsewhere (*Emily, Lover Man*), the melody is drawn into focus through Kuhn's broader variations. His touch, whether caressing or clipped, is a constant joy, bright as a rainbow but much more substantial. He can move us with the beauty of *Don't Explain* (his reading seems to flower on the second bridge); and he can parody mere sentimentality, as he does by quoting the verse from *Ole Man River* at the close of *Danny Boy*.

Two tracks extend beyond three choruses and deserve special mention. Kuhn recorded a sizzling version of Sonny Rollins's *Airegin* with Stan Getz, Scott LaFaro, and Pete La Roca in 1961, which Verve finally released on the 1984 album *Stan the Man*. If anything, the present solo version is even more magnificent, a continuous, five-chorus, self-generating whole. Particular attention should be paid to the left hand: it is silent as the solo commences, quietly prods the right hand by the second chorus, responds to the hint of tempo at the end of chorus two with an emphatic call for reconsideration, is happily rolling along by chorus four, and cross-riffs dramatically in chorus five. All the while, an assertive, quicksilver story is being told above.

Yesterday's Gardenias was also part of the Getz book, though Kuhn learned this Glenn Miller hit as a teenager in Boston in the early fifties, when he worked in Serge Chaloff's trio. (The band had a drummer but no bass, which made it one of Kuhn's more challenging learning experiences.) This is Kuhn deep in the tradition, popping off single-note lines and indulging the jazzman's fancy for quotation. *Seven Come Eleven*, the Charlie Christian riff, appears briefly at bar twenty of the first chorus, and Neal Hefti's *Repetition* (which becomes an ongoing motif) emerges at bar twenty-five of the second. (These are momentary inspirations rather than fixed routines, fleeting glimpses of Kuhn's encyclopedic knowledge of song, which will raise different echoes the next time *Yesterday's Gardenias* is performed.) The improvisation testifies to Kuhn's swing, as well as to the talents of bassist Harvie Swartz, a veteran of two Kuhn quartets and recently a successful bandleader and recording artist in his own right.

The shorter pieces, for the most part, involve tunes more familiar to most listeners. *Lover Man* and *Don't Explain* recall Billie Holiday's glorious forties recordings; *Two for the Road* and *Emily* are gems mined from sixties film scores; *Tennessee Waltz* is

quintessential fifties; and *Danny Boy* is older than the proverbial hills. What emerges is a glowing, immensely personal view of each song. To breathe new life into each of these pieces, to transcend mere exercises in nostalgia, is the ultimate test of interpretive skill for Kuhn on this recording. These kinds of performances are not "about" playing fast or pretty, but bespeak a lifetime of concern for the substance of a song, and the fact that he has been playing these songs all his life is perhaps the real reason *Mostly Ballads* succeeds. --Bob Blumenthal

Bob Blumenthal is a practicing attorney working in education law. He is a contributing editor of the *Boston Phoenix* and a guest critic for the *Boston Globe*.

- 1- Body and Soul 4:18*
(Green-Heyman-Sour-Eyton)
- 2- Emily 4:19*
(Mandel-Mercer)
- 3- Lonely Town 2:37
(Bernstein-Comden-Green)
- 4- Airegin 3:17
(Rollins)
- 5- Tennessee Waltz 2:14*
(Stewart-King)
- 6- Danny Boy 2:09
(Weatherly)
- 7- 'Round Midnight 5:43
(Monk-Williams-Hanighen)
- 8- Yesterday's Gardenias 3:53*
(Robertson-Cogane-Mysels)
- 9- Don't Explain 4:30*
(Holiday-Herzog)
- 10-How High the Moon 2:11
(Lewis-Hamilton)
- 11-Lover Man 4:08
(Ramirez-Sherman-Davis)
- 12-Two for the Road 2:52*
(Mancini-Bricusse)

Steve Kuhn, piano
Harvie Swartz, bass, on * selections

Publishers

Body and Soul: Warner Bros. Inc. (ASCAP)/Chappell Music (ASCAP)
Emily: CBS Miller Catalog Inc. (ASCAP)
Lonely Town: Warner Bros. Inc. (ASCAP)
Airegin: Prestige Music (BMI)
Tennessee Waltz: Acuff-Rose-Opryland Music, Inc. (BMI)
Danny Boy: Boosey and Hawkes, Inc. (ASCAP)

'Round Midnight: Warner Bros. Inc. (ASCAP)
Yesterday's Gardenias: Morley Music Co. (ASCAP)/Penn Music Co. (ASCAP)
Don't Explain: Duchess Music Corporation (MCA) (BMI)
How High the Moon: Chappell Music (ASCAP)
Lover Man: MCA Music Publishing (ASCAP)
Two for the Road: Northridge Music Co. (ASCAP)/20th Century Music (ASCAP)

Producer: Robert Hurwitz
Recording engineer: David Baker
Recorded at Media Sound Studios, New York, January 3, 1984
Piano: Hamburg Steinway D#330
Photographs: Martin Reichenthal
Cover design: Bob Defrin

STEVE KUHN/SELECTED DISCOGRAPY

As a Leader

Three Waves (1965). Contact CS-5.
The October Suite (with Gary McFarland) (1966). Impulse AS-9136.
In Europe '68 (1968). Prestige 7694.
Steve Kuhn (1971). Buddah 5098.
Trance (1974). ECM 1052.
Ecstasy (1974). ECM 1058.
Motility (1977). ECM 1094.
Non-Fiction (1978). ECM 1124.
Playground (1980). ECM 1159.
Last Year's Waltz (1981). ECM 1213.
Life's Magic (1986). Blackhawk BKH-522.

As a Sideman

Kenny Dorham, *Jazz Contemporary* (1959). Time 52004.
Stan Getz/Bob Brookmeyer, *Fall 1961* (1961). Verve 8418.
Art Farmer, *Sing Me Softly of the Blues* (1965). Atlantic 1442.
Pete La Roca, *Basra* (1965). Blue Note 84205.
Oliver Nelson, *Sound Pieces* (1966). Impulse 9129.
Bob Moses Quintet, *Family* (1980). Sutra SUS-1003.
Steve Swallow, *Home* (1981). ECM 1160.
David Darling, *Cycles* (1982). ECM 1219.

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Gioia, Ted. "Steve Kuhn: He's Back, He's Performing and He's Due," *The Stanford Daily* (California), October 14, 1982.
Lyons, Len. *The Great Jazz Pianists*. New York: Quill, 1983, pp. 230-34.

Smith, H. Allen. *Low Man on the Totem Pole*. Garden City, NY: Doubleday, 1941, pp. 290-95.

Williams, Martin. *Jazz Masters in Transition 1957-69*. New York: Macmillan, 1970, pp. 236-41.

Zabor, Rafi. "Steve Kuhn and Sheila Jordan," *Musician*, no. 27 (September/October 1980).

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