

POP MUSIC

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# **Around the horn, he minds Miles**

## **Stanko finds direction from late jazz legend**

**By Andrew Gilbert, Globe Correspondent | April 18, 2010**

What would Miles do? That's the question Polish trumpeter Tomasz Stanko asks himself whenever he reaches a creative crossroads. Judging by the results, keeping the late trumpet legend Miles Davis in mind has served Stanko exceedingly well.

One of the giants of European jazz, Stanko never met Davis. But he's drawn sustenance from him for more than 50 years — not by emulating Davis's sound but by exploring the implications of his group concepts.

"Miles explained a lot of things, and he still does," says Stanko, 67, who concludes a nine-city US tour Tuesday at the Regattabar with his Nordic quintet, the same band introduced last month on his ravishing ECM album "Dark Eyes."

"I remember his simplicity," Stanko says. "Sometimes he played only a couple of notes and let the band play. That's very difficult. It's a pleasure to play, and we're the leader! But if you're thinking higher, more musically, you know when not to play. If I have some question about what to do, I always go to Miles."

While Stanko recorded his first ECM album in 1976, his relationship with the label blossomed two decades later, producing an ongoing series of sessions distinguished by the trumpeter's distilled lyricism, burnished bronze tone, and free-jazz-inflected improvisation.

Like Davis, Stanko is a superlative talent scout, and several recent albums feature an extraordinary Polish rhythm section led by pianist Marcin Wasilewski, a trio that's emerged as an acclaimed group in its own right. But after working with his young countrymen for more than a decade Stanko felt the need for a change of direction.

When Stanko put out the word he was looking for a new cast of collaborators, Paul Motian recommended Jakob Bro, a prolific guitarist featured on the drummer's 2006 ECM album "Garden of Eden," and bassist Anders Christensen. Both players hail from Denmark and provide Stanko with spacious, rhythmically supple support. He completed the band with two gifted Finnish players, 36-year-old pianist Alexi Tuomarila and 28-year-old drummer Olavi Louhivuori.

"The quartet was very nice, but it was time for me to change something, to get fresh ideas and sounds," Stanko says. "I have two kinds of fascination. First with novelty, any kind of avant-garde artist looking for new styles, like Albert Ayler. I also have a really strong passion for tradition. I like beauty in the

traditional meaning, and I like to connect these two things, like Miles and Coltrane.”

Davis comes up often when discussing Stanko with other musicians. The prodigious trumpeter Dave Douglas notes that Stanko belongs to a horn lineage that flows from Davis, who devised his singular sound and style after realizing he couldn't match Dizzy Gillespie's technical virtuosity.

“Tomasz is such a special player,” Douglas says. “He's another example of somebody who proves that you can take the most unorthodox sound and technique with the trumpet and make it the most expressive medium. It's the thing that made Miles so important, and in Tomasz I hear that tremendous soul, Polish soul, coming from a very deep place.”

Jazz was a key part of the Polish art scene as Stanko was growing up in the late 1950s. Stanko launched his first band as a student in Krakow in 1962 with piano master Adam Makowicz, a pioneering group with the deceptively cutesy name the Jazz Darlings. While many of their peers were still struggling to master bebop, the Darlings assimilated the new concepts being introduced by Ornette Coleman, Cecil Taylor, and George Russell.

Stanko credits pianist Krzysztof Komeda, who composed memorable scores for several Roman Polanski films, including “Knife in the Water,” “Cul-de-sac,” and “Rosemary's Baby,” with honing his harmonic sensibility and expansive approach to musical structure. Between 1963-67, he recorded nearly a dozen albums with Komeda's quintet, and toured extensively around Europe.

By the early '70s Stanko was a central figure on the European avant-garde music scene. Over the years he's increased his New York City presence too, performing extensively with Taylor in the 1980s, and eventually taking an apartment on the Upper East Side, where he stays when he's not in Warsaw or on the road.

No matter what the project, Stanko brings his highly evocative sound, combining rigorously conceived improvisation and long, lovingly formed melodic lines. There's a fierce quality to his music, but even at his most abstract he infuses each note with tenderness and sorrow, a master storyteller who never gets lost in his tale.

“Instinct is my main way to play,” Stanko says. “I was a really big fan of bebop and hard bop and all this mainstream stuff. But I'm also into Ornette and Cecil. I'm open to everything. As a connoisseur, maybe this is the key to my music. I'm coming from a dark country, and we have a special kind of melancholy.” ■