

# WINDOW TO THE SOUL

**Tomasz Stanko** has ripped up the rulebook once again debuting a crack new band at the London Jazz Festival this month and a finely-honed guitar-flavoured sound on their first album *Dark Eyes*.

INTERVIEW :: STEPHEN GRAHAM

It is curious to think that at one time not that long ago you would have had to travel a very long way, deep into a Europe divided into East and West, to hear Tomasz Stanko. The veteran trumpeter couldn't get a decent gig in this country for love or money until the 1990s. And then something slightly miraculous happened for him as a new Europe was created after the Berlin Wall came down 20 years ago. To anyone who knew of him before then he was a distant underground hero from the 1960s Krakow avant garde. Only lingering reports of a scintillating Berlin jazz fest gig in the 1970s with his ferocious band the Unit, or the fine *Balladyna* album with Dave Holland from later on in the decade kept the Polish player's name alive to the outside world.

Like so many others the fire could have gone out there and then. But the 1990s saw him back, stronger and more creative than ever. The extravagant trumpet sound based on Clifford Brown and Miles Davis channelled through the prism of the trinity of Krzysztof Komeda, Ornette Coleman and Krzysztof Penderecki was still intact but the writing was stronger than ever.

Stanko, now 67, quickly went through three distinctive periods. After the rehabilitating one-off album *Bluish*, he created two key groups. The first with Bobo Stenson, Anders Jormin and Tony Oxley reached new heights topped off by the album *Leosia*; the second his recent all-Polish quartet with Stanko fronting what used to be called the Simple Acoustic Trio with Marcin Wasilewski. And now, out of the blue, new album *Dark Eyes* marks the beginning of a third phase.

Stanko has recruited two Finns and two Danes to join him for what he sees, rather than mellowing, as a chance to go the opposite direction stepping away from his "straightahead" quartet that released final album *Lontano* three years ago. "I am in a kind of new period," he says. "I closed my time with my Polish quartet with a conventional, mainstream kind of thing. But now I'm driving for more expression. It's just the beginning but I think it is fascinating for me."

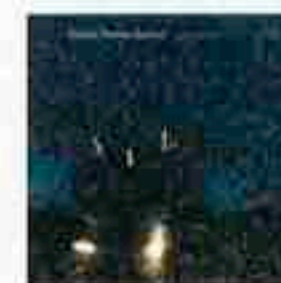
Replacing Wasilewski must have been tough but in his place is a real find, the Finn Alexi Tuomarila. "I was playing with Bobo Stenson in Oslo," Stanko says, "and Alexi played before us and I had a chance to hear him. Bobo said 'this piano player plays good' and I started to read about him. I read a recommendation, a very good

review from Stuart Nicholson. But I didn't know anything about how Alexi can play my music and it was very difficult to check this. I took the decision to try him out and invited him to gig in Poland and after this gig I was sure that I wanted to play with this cat. I was also always looking for a guitar sound and had a gig with John Abercrombie somewhere in Poland.

"I was thinking about connecting my trumpet sound with the guitar sound and somebody told me about Jakob Bro. I knew that he was playing with Paul Motian and through the Internet I liked what I heard. He's a guitar player with a Jim Hall style. He doesn't play too much which I love and he has a good sound. I also invited him to play with me and after the gig I started to think the combination was very good. They recommended to me the rhythm section drummer from Finland [Olavi Louhivuori] and bass player [Anders Christensen], a very interesting guy from Denmark."

The new album reviewed in this issue is unique in Stanko's discography in that it features the key presence of an electric guitar introducing mind-expanding new potential to the cinematic scope of Stanko's sound. The view from the green hill, Stanko's artistic muse, now stretches for miles. That vista also spans the years with Stanko looking back to the time just before he joined his great mentor Krzysztof Komeda in 1963, the composer of film music and classic free form album *Astigmatic*, an early influential airing of the new European jazz aesthetic in the mid-1960s. Komeda's widow, Zofia, the great custodian and champion of his music for 40 years died recently. Stanko, carrying forward her mission, says: "I play only this music because I love to play it and it's very similar to my music, my conception. This conception was something like my music and it was easy for me to arrange. Like Monk, you can change Monk's music and it's still Monk; Ellington's music is the same and with Komeda you can change it but it's still Komeda."

These days Stanko spends long stretches living in New York in breaks between tours and it was there that he came upon a Oskar Kokoschka painting which inspired the major track of the new album 'The Dark Eyes of Martha Hirsch' when he visited an exhibition at the Neue Galerie on Fifth Avenue. "I loved the eyes; I stayed a long time and later I was just coming for this picture just to see the eyes. The music is quite long; it's four parts, kind of dark. I spent quite a long time writing the ballad part in the beginning and then the part of Hirsch at the ending and then I got inspiration. I asked the dark eyes to give some ending to the composition because I am a realist composer as well. But generally the atmosphere of the museum gave me something." So then the eyes have it and for Stanko they are a window to the soul and a gateway to a brave new world.



**Dark Eyes** is out now on ECM.

The Tomasz Stanko Quintet tours this month. The dates are: Warwick Arts

Centre, Coventry (9 November); RNCM Manchester (10); Lakeside Arts Centre Nottingham (11); St George's Bristol (12); The Edge Arts Centre, Shropshire (13); London Jazz Festival QEH, London (14) and the Sage Gateshead (15).