

## Jazz threesome achieves liftoff

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In an interview, jazz pianist Jean-Michel Pilc spoke more than once about "going to planet music" when he plays. It's a place where musical analysis or matters of structure or musical influence melt away, and he gets happily lost in the flow of sound and ideas.

Seeing Mr. Pilc and his dynamic trio at SOhO on Monday, you got a clearer concept of what he was talking about. Especially in the context of his finely tuned and interconnected trio (with bassist François Moutin and drummer Ari Hoenig), Mr. Pilc cuts the image of an intuitive and emotional virtuoso, seeking out new frontiers and escaping clichés as he plays.

Mr. Pilc is one of the more acclaimed "new" pianists on the jazz scene, though he has been playing professionally for more than 20 years, partly in his native France. He moved to New York 10 years ago, and the last five years have seen his star rise dramatically, and for good reason.

Making his Santa Barbara debut at SOhO (and to a full, happy house, it should be reported), Mr. Pilc and company played with control and abandon on pieces full of open spaces and margin for collective invention. Songs became suites on the spot. Fleeting glimpses of familiar melodies and quotes, from "It Ain't Necessarily So" to "Giant Steps" and a wink of "Eleanor Rigby," gave us recognizable musical reference points.

But clearly, Mr. Pilc is mostly interested in process and exploration rather than easy-does-it recitations of jazz standards. On a rare standard treatment this night, "Stella By Starlight," the trio artfully turned the melody and song structure into Silly Putty.

This is a piano trio less about the central role of the piano than the focus on the machinery and dynamics of the group, in a way comparable to Ahmad Jamal's dynamically sensitive trio (heard last fall at the Lobero). Mr. Pilc obviously has technical flair to spare and could easily lapse into showboating, but he consistently kept his own pyrotechnics in check for the good of the, pardon our French, esprit de corps.

Paradoxes prevail here. The music can be "inside," tonal and accessible, and "outside," venturing into more experimental asides and splashes of atonal or arrhythmic sounds. The group is tight, as when they suddenly catch accents together or play a complex unison line, but also loose by definition.

Each of these musicians is captivating. As a unit, they bring an unusual group-minded intensity to the gig. Mr. Moutin, who brought his own amazing group Mountain Reunion Quartet to SOhO in January, is a bold and visceral player who can be extroverted in his soloing. Mr. Hoenig contrasts that style with a more detail-oriented subtlety. Mr. Pilc, meanwhile, goes every which way in his pianism, but you can also feel a sense of self-editing at work.

In a way, Mr. Hoenig was the most subversively interesting musician on the stand, holding down the rhythmic fort but ever busy painting intricate designs with his clenched limbs. On the explosive tune "Cardinal Points," the title cut of one of Mr. Pilc's CDs, the pianist shifted from a spidery melody in an odd meter to a funky shuffle groove. Late in the song, Mr. Hoenig kept upping the ante with double-timed rhythms or other fancy limb work. All's fair in love and jazz, if you've got the heart and the technical finesse.

Monday's memorable show came to a close on a blues theme, highlighted by a witty and melodic drum solo using mallets. Mr. Pilc and his fellow astronauts -- with us along for the ride -- departed from planet music, returning us to our terra firma lives, but with appetites whetted for more from this remarkable group.