

Under the influence of jazz

In life and music, pianist Jean-Michel Pilc listens to his gut. So far, he's gotten good advice.

By Lynell George, Los Angeles Times Staff Writer

September 25, 2004

Who knows how long we've been whispering about "what to do about jazz" as if it were nearly a cadaver; all the scheming about how to "resuscitate" or "revive" it. But none of this grousing takes into account the best of what goes on around the world, every night, as the sun goes down and musicians travel to near-empty rooms, and then count it down — trying simply to write the next chapter.

Dead it's not. Not all of it. Problem is, so much of the best of it is just under the radar.

Case in point: pianist Jean-Michel Pilc.

Pilc (pronounced "Peelk") opened a six-night stand at the Jazz Bakery on Tuesday, still floating from a trio of sets at the Monterey Jazz Festival — his first West Coast tour as leader. First things first: He coaxed the timid first-night crowd closer: "You sure you want to be in the back of the room?" he said, peering into the darkness, urging those lurking toward the back wall to fill in the front rows. "I feel lonely."

Pilc is all about intimacy. Even the stage setup looks cramped. His trio is arranged in tight triangulation with Pilc's back to the audience, bassist François Moutin at one point and drummer Ari Hoenig at the other. But that's not to shut you out, one begins to understand, it's like turning the speakers your way.

The starter course is a little Coltrane and Ellington. This is not your grandfather's 'Trane or Duke, mind you. Pilc is known for completely overhauling the architecture of the familiar. Everything comes out: all the walls, the floors and ceilings too.

Sloe-eyed Moutin, sporting a wicked forelock, looked for most of the evening as if he were in hand-to-hand combat with his bass. The boyish Hoenig, a disarming secret weapon, served up smacking, thrilling runs that left him gleefully flushed, as if on a bobbing bobsled.

Pilc was feeling impish, full of tucked-away surprises. He was up and about, thinking — as if pacing his living room in his carpet slippers. His timing has a suspense-novel feel to it. He plays a note — or five. Rests both hands in his lap, thinking — feeling. Then charges forward again. Pulls back. Considers the canvas. Fills it in with textures: a tug or rub at a piano string, beating on the piano lid or shaking the sheets of music over the

piano strings. His ears are trained to catch the tiniest spark, to pull a notion out of the air and run with it, squeezing out something startlingly vivid and altogether modern.

Pilc, 44, would say he doesn't make conscious decisions. He's led by his gut; it's a pull as fierce as gravity toward one interest or the next. It is how he jettisoned out of Paris and into New York a decade ago. It's how he dumped science for jazz two decades earlier. "For me it was another life," Pilc says a couple of hours before an afternoon sound check at the club, enjoying the power boost of éclair and a tall iced coffee.

With three ensemble albums under his belt, Pilc has now released his first solo album, "Follow Me," on Dreyfus Jazz.

He admits it took a bit to shake off his awkwardness around this stripped-down setup. Just him, sure, but "with mikes over the piano and people looking at you," he says in a voice that is part lilt, part sandpaper. But the result is a startlingly forthright album: a mix of American jazz standards, French compositions and a smattering of honed, delicately appointed originals.

Born in Paris, Pilc started studying classical piano around age 7. "But I was really very lazy when it came to practicing So, I just started improvising in front of my teacher. So she told me, 'Yeah, you like to improvise. You may not be a classical player.' "

He already had an ear for the looseness of jazz. His uncles had introduced him to a slew of records: Bix Beiderbecke, Louis Armstrong, Django Reinhardt. "The shock for me was Bix. I just jumped in the air."

He did very little else but listen. "I learned jazz the right way, which is by oral tradition. Listening to all the great people. Transcribe. Play." He finally took himself out into the world and fell in with Moutin and his drummer brother, Louis, who introduced him to the universe of modern jazz and a stage to play it on.

Right about the same time, Pilc was working as a scientist with the French space agency. "It was ridiculous. I was way too much into music to be anything good apart from a musician."

Pilc tends to look at that period "as sort of like an accident."

"I did it from 23 to 27. It's just so irrelevant to who I am now." Moving into jazz "was a total lack of choice. There is this big hand that pushes you in a direction. If you don't do what it says, you're going to be so unhappy all your life."

In time, the pianist made a name for himself on the scene, playing with an array of American and European musicians who would swing through — Roy Haynes and Marcus Miller, Jean Toussaint and one of his most beloved artists, pianist Martial Solal.

But he foresaw the path his life might take. "I thought ... I would end up being one of

those very respected *French* musicians. I thought, 'I'm not going to stay in Paris and watch things unfold in such a predictable way. I'm going to put myself in danger.' That's the only way you learn."

About a decade ago, he landed in New York with a couple of names in his pocket. "I was a little freaked out. There were 2,500 guitar players working in the street with glasses, long hair, wolf man looking, completely lost in space. Reminded me of the scientists I knew. That didn't give me a good feeling."

He found a circle of jam sessions and met Hoenig. "I had the shock: 'My life is going to be different now.' " Adding Moutin, who had also just relocated, the trio developed buzz around New York. "Mr. Pilc seems to have dropped from the sky fully formed, with technique and his ideas in place," wrote Ben Ratliff in the *New York Times*.

In the last few years, Pilc has been experimenting with configurations. The trio at the Bakery is his special jewel. "This group is always going to be in my life."

What makes Pilc refreshing is not just the sinew and the energy of his approach but also his sense of humor, the personality that seeps through his work — the idea that "serious jazz" can be muscular and smart and full of camouflaged chords and asymmetrical tempos, but also have a sense of wonderment.

Like the best oral histories, Pilc's chapters are speckled with allusion — a montage of the history of jazz, of pop culture for that matter — but listeners are left with something stubbornly unique.

The run at the Jazz Bakery will give Los Angeles an opportunity to hear what all the East Coast buzz is about. And while "Follow Me" is an elegant document of one of Pilc's many moods, he's right — it's difficult to capture what happens live, particularly those sheets of sound that he can summon from his piano in all of its burnished resonance.

"I can't even remember my own compositions!" Pilc blushes, paging through his stack of music on stage. "But I wrote this one when I was 2."

"But that was only two weeks ago," Moutin admonishes.

Indeed. Not dead yet. Just getting started.