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by Tad Hendrickson

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The Knitting Factory Tap Bar was filled with an unusually large number of guys in ponytails and leather jackets on a Sunday night back in January. Many were up front intently watching guitarist Alex Skolnick's every move as his trio played what sounded like a traditional jazz standard. The song ended and Skolnick thanked people for coming and asked the crowd if anyone knew the song. Two guys in the back immediately shouted, "Dream On!" As in Aerosmith.

It's become commonplace in recent years for younger jazzmen to plunder rock and pop for cover material, but few of them can claim, as Skolnick can, that they've warmed up for Slayer and been featured in *Downbeat* magazine. Skolnick was the hot-shit lead guitarist for the Bay Area speed-metal band Testament from 1986 to 1992 before walking away from the band and metal to study jazz full-time.

"People thought I was completely nuts," Skolnick recalls. The band didn't understand and neither did his teachers. "I would say something like, 'Our latest record just sold 400,000 copies,' which to a jazz guy is unbelievable, and they'd say, 'What are you doing here?' "

Skolnick went back to school, eventually moving to New York and getting a BFA in jazz performance from the New School in 2001. It's there that he met trio bassist John Graham Davis and drummer Matt Zebroski. The trio originally worked on homework assignments and practiced standards, learning jazz's vocabulary. Then it dawned on Skolnick that there was a way to combine his old music love with his newer one.

"One night I had this dream where I heard the Scorpions' 'No One Like You' done as a bossa nova jazz tune. At first it seemed to be a bit of a joke and we were laughing about it because there was a certain absurdity to doing a Scorpions tune with an acoustic jazz ensemble. But it felt great—as good as any of the standards we were doing—so why not?"

Other songs followed, and rather than wait for a label to figure out what to do with the band, they released *Goodbye to Romance: Standards for a New Generation* on their own label (available through alexskolnick.com). Also featuring a few originals, the album sounds like the longhaired and tattooed stepchild of Joe Pass. It's actually surprising how well the songs, particularly those that were originally power ballads, work as jazz tunes—the strong melodies lend themselves to improvisation in a way that their composers never imagined.

That night at the Tap Bar, the band did a nice job expanding on the recorded tunes. They've already done a few short tours and typically play around town in the smaller jazz clubs. Not your typical jazz scene, the Skolnick Trio's audience is refreshingly rock 'n'

roll, ordering drinks and shots, smoking and talking during the set, and every once in a while giving a whoop when they recognize a tune.

"Many were rockers or still are," Skolnick says of the band's audience. "They're having a good time. We're having a good time, and we're not ashamed of that. Playing music should be like that." We couldn't agree more.