

Features

SBB's Jozef Skrzek: The Daily Vault Interview

by [Mark Kadzielawa](#)



Jozef Skrzek sounds very relaxed speaking from his home in Poland. It's a late evening when I call, but he seems to be happy to discuss his beloved SBB, a band he formed nearly 40 years ago. Despite the poor phone connection, Skrzek is full of enthusiasm, very laid back and willing to share a lot of interesting facts about the band and his songwriting in general.

SBB(which stands for Silesian Blues Band) is a fantastic progressive rock band from Poland. They formed back in 1969 with three already established musicians: Jozef Skrzek handled keyboards, bass and vocals, Apostolis Antymos on guitar, and Jerzy Piotrowski on drums. The band quickly made a name for themselves in the Eastern Block, and their highly inventive musical style was noticed outside of Poland and the Eastern Block. They were approached to do English versions of their records and continued to release albums in Poland and West Germany while touring and playing music festivals such as Roskilde. SBB has always stirred up a lot of excitement with their music, and their incredible ability to improvise quickly won them a great following. But due to the fact that they were living in a country under Communist rule, the band was limited; there were many occasions where they were held up or prevented from furthering their career by Communist idealism, for their freedom-focused music sent officials into a frenzy.

The band split up in 1980 only to return in 1993. Since then, the group's activity has been nothing short of intense; whether it's releasing new music or archival material, SBB is making up for the lost time while simultaneously making their name vital again and regaining the respect they once held. Recently, the band was invited to perform at the Baja progressive music fest in Mexico.

Nowadays, the band is comprised by Skrzek and Antymos from the original line up joined by Paul Vertico, and recently, the drum stool was handed over to Gabor Nemeth from Hungary. Original drummer Jerzy Piotrowski occasionally reunites with the band, but for the most part he opted not to participate full-time. SBB has always maintained its international line-up, as Apostolis is originally from Greece, Vertico was from the United States, and Gabor is Hungarian. It's a strange mix, but it works perfectly for the band.

*SBB recently released *The Rock*, a solid album that will ensure the band's longevity and legacy in progressive rock history. The disc was only released in Poland but has been distributed throughout the world to good reviews and enthusiastic fan responses, which proves once again that music is a universal language that unites its lovers all over the world.*

Jozef Skrzek dissects the new record track-by-track and also gives his insights as to what went into the making of these songs; he also discusses a bit of history and unfulfilled ambitions along the way.

What inspired you to call the new record *The Rock*, and what is the title song about?

Jozef Skrzek: The idea for the song came to me actually during one of my trips. I was visiting a mountain range, something I often do. As I was walking up and down the mountain trail, I felt inspired, and it turned into this song. Musically, it was the first recording we did in Budapest (Hungary). We were at Gabor Nemeth's studio, and we just jammed to see what we could come up with. "The Rock" was one of the motives that we wrote, and from that we developed the rest of the song. We played with that track for a while, but eventually, once we were set to record it, it became what it is now. Our record company took this simple and personal concept and made it into a record cover.

"Burning Minds" returns to the 1980 motif from *Memento z Banalnym Tryptykiem* (direct Polish title). Was this intentional or coincidental?

Memento is a special record for us. We did come back to that theme very briefly in this track. It serves as a springboard for this song, as it really builds up and takes off on its own. This song also has a very deep lyrical content, and musically it just fits the mood. The lyrics deal with losing a father, and anyone who has gone through the experience is able to relate to the pain that is left behind.

In "Heaven And Hell," the band sound like a locomotive that is gaining speed before taking off into the unknown.

This song shows a very wide space when it comes to the musical textures. It has a very interesting keyboard sequences. We were trying to show a musical mood that would reflect the title. Also, it has a lot of possibilities when it comes to performing it live. It's a very imaginary track that requires reflection from the listener.

"Silence" is a song in the right place on the record. It's sort of turning point that calms the listener down before the second part of the album kicks in.

"Silence" is a very special song to me. It involves a piano, and when you listen to it, it's a like the time is standing still. I consider this song to be a pearl in my catalogue. It's a very delicate track that allows you to breath, yet it carries a special message. It's a song that shows happiness in itself, and that's what the lyrics are dealing with. We're very happy how we were able to make the lyrics and the music to come as one.

"Sunny Day" has a very psychedelic nature, and it's very interesting how this song evolves.

Sunny Day is like a blues song. It's a song that evolved a lot when we were writing it, but it's kept in a blues convention. If you were to strip it down, you'd see it strictly as a traditional blues song. We were trying to make the time stop with this one. When you listen to this song, you should be able to relax as if you were lying down on a tropical sunny beach. Your life should stop, and you should just feel free and unaffected by the daily stress.



"My Paradise" shows a very jazzy face of SBB, and it's probably the most experimental track on the album.

Our guitar player, Apostolis, was always close to jazz. He was very influential in how this song turned out. On this track you

see how jazz and rock connects in our music. There is a lot of diversity in this song because it is so multi textured. And his guitar is all over the place here, so you definitely hear what he was after.

“Pilgrim” is a track that could go on and on. It has that ongoing texture and it could probably be developed into a phenomenal song live.

This is exactly what we were thinking when the song was being written. We first presented this song live during a festival. This song is written for recently deceased Czeslaw Niemen, one key artist in Polish rock music. And the festival was dedicated to him, so we did this live not knowing how it would turn out. And the reception was great. We continued to develop this song, and as you said, it could go on forever. Also, we were writing music to a classical poem. It's never easy to do that, to be able to match the music to words that were written long before us and still maintain what the words and music were intended to perceive. The poem has an incredible line in it: it says you only have as much earth/ground as your foot is able to stand on. I found that to be such an outstanding and inspirational thought when writing the music.

“Akri” is a song that shows off the excellent instrumental ability of the band, but it also shows how you can combine several emotions into one powerful piece.

“Akri” was the last song we recorded for this album. We were basically done with the record. Prior to the recording I was in Greece where I performed at the Acropolis, and I came back still under the impression of the place. I started to write to put these emotions into music, and when it was done I asked Apostolis what to call this piece. He automatically came up with the title. It all fell into one piece, and it completely made sense to record and include this song on the album.

“Zug A Zene Mindenhol” is a first duet in the history of the band. You performed the song with Tamas Somlo from Locomotiv GT. The song is interesting because it is performed in two languages.

This song was just having fun in the studio. It just sort of evolved out of us being in the same studio, and wanting to do something at the last minute. So we did, and it was fun for us to do. When it came to the recording of this song, we did it simultaneously from two different locations. I was recording my part in Poland, and Tamas was singing his parts from Hungary. Once the parts were recorded we just mixed them together, and the song is what it is today. The technology nowadays allowed us to do it, and it was something new to try for all of us. It was fantastic to be able to do it. I look at it as an adventure that got us closer as performers and friends.

Staying on the topic of Hungary, that's where your new drummer comes from. How did this come to be?

Gabor Nemeth is a veteran when it comes to playing drums. He's a very interesting person. He is very dedicated to his craft. Gabor lives and breathes drums. He's a good arranger, and has a very musical intuition. He reminds me of Jerzy Piotrowski (SBB's original drummer) in the way he approaches his instrument. Gabor is very involved in music, at all times. If he's not playing, he's doing drum clinics. There's always something going on musically in his life. He helps out a lot of young kids to become musicians. I mean, he lives for anything that has to do with music. He's always ready to play, and his drums are fantastically tuned at all times. He's a very intense drummer. I mean, prior to him coming into the band we played with Paul Vertico, who is a known personality in the music world, but Gabor in his own way is very original. When we did some initial live shows with him, it automatically clicked musically. We knew we had found a great musician at that very moment.

I've heard that your current album was supposed to be recorded in Chicago -- is that true?

Yes, that was our initial plan. We were going to do some recording at Paul's (Vertico) studio. We wanted to record some of the tracks in Chicago, and eventually hook up with Mack (the renowned producer who was involved with SBB's last album and worked with the band in the '70s) and do additional recordings with him. We have a long history working with Mack and we're friends. It didn't work out for scheduling and financial reasons, but that was the initial plan. I think if we could do the album in the United States with someone like Mack, the band would sound differently. I just have a feeling about it. Also, I think it would be possible to get a bigger and better distribution, so our music would be easily accessible, and heard by more people. I would like to do a record that would go through a label with a worldwide distribution. SBB is a band that on a world scale is very good and deserves to do records that could be distributed all over the world. Of course I think about the proper

promotion that would elevate our name. These are steps we would like to take, and we're getting closer. These were the plans we've had a year ago, and I'm not letting these dreams go. We would like to finalize these plans at one point in our career.



The last few years were extremely fruitful when it came to releasing your archival recordings. All of your albums are now available, so are countless live recordings, and even few DVDs were released as well.

It all started when our Polish label, Metal Mind Productions, asked us to put together an anthology [a 22-CD box of all the band's studio and live recordings]. This box was sold out within a month. I felt this set could go places outside of Poland, but that's a limitation Polish labels face. In addition, a lot of recordings that we did back in the '70s surfaced. Some were live, some were sessions at various radio stations, and some came from private collections. This turned into two separate box sets called *Live Tapes*. So, we're talking like 60 CDs that were recently released. That's a lot, but the fans were very pleased to get hold of these recordings. I still think we should do one big studio record with a name producer. I think we still have it in us, and that's our goal. We want to make a record that would bring us a worldwide musical acclaim. And if we ever get that chance, we would feel completely fulfilled.

Why did SBB break up back in 1980?

We felt a little exhausted at that point. We were very active for the number of years and that certainly took a toll on us. We were doing many concerts in Eastern Europe, but managed plenty of trips to the West as well. The time came that we had to say goodbye. On the other hand, Poland was going through a lot of turmoil at the time. There was a marshal law imposed by the government and we saw no point of carrying on under such limiting circumstances. The album we did back then, *Memento...*, was a great way to sum up the year and what was going on. A year later, in 1981, I did *War Of The Worlds* (a solo album for the film of the same name), and then you get a country on the brink of the civil war – I felt at the time playing rock concerts was a joke. Most of the concerts were just an excuse to start riots and clash with the officials. I chose to spend that time playing organ music in churches. The churches at the times were considered a safe haven, so I performed there a lot. When we split back then, it was a natural thing to do for us, but at the same time we felt that big changes are ahead of us.

Throughout this time, all of you were individually active -- what caused the band to reform in the '90s?

We've always maintained contact. We didn't part in a bad way, and we've always stayed in touch. We never stopped being close as people. At one point we've decided to play together just to see what's left in us. From the very first moment, it felt great to play as SBB again, so we just carried on.

In the meantime, as the band was absent, it became very popular on the international scale, even more so than when it was functioning.

That's right. Whenever we play we get a fantastic response. People do remember us from the past and there are plenty of new fans that got into us. They always tell us the band's music makes them feel free, and I think that's great. These are also the emotions that go into our music. I used to get massive amount of letters from the Soviet Union in the '70s and '80s and they used to tell us how much our music meant to them. When we go there now, we're still treated with a great respect. Our songs dealt with the subjects such as freedom and the audiences responded to that because it was very close to what they were feeling inside.

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