

## “Who let this Cat Out?”

### Mike Stern talks to Joff England

If you were asked to give a one word description of guitarist/composer and bandleader Mike Stern, the title of his current album, “Eclectic” might be a hard one to beat. Stern’s playing style, whilst heavily ensconced in the jazz camp, also draws on his early love of rock and blues. These influences, blended with his deep passion and understanding for all things jazz, has been described by Stern as “heavy metal be-bop“(1).

When Mike first picked up the guitar he began teaching himself to improvise, playing along with his mother’s blues records. He soon found that he was able to hear and emulate these blues solos himself. Clearly inspired, he then gravitated towards her jazz LP’s starting with albums like Herbie Hancock’s ‘Maiden Voyage’.

Mike admits that initially trying to play along with these recordings was challenging and despite discovering a deep passion for jazz, he initially felt a little overwhelmed by it “there was just too many notes.... too many chords, too many scales.... too much stuff to think about”(2).

In 1971 he enrolled at the prestigious Berklee College of Music and studied under both Mick Goodrick and Pat Metheny. The rest, you could say, is history. Stern has become one of the all time greats on the instrument with a staggering technical facility and jazz vocabulary the envy of guitarists and musicians the world over. He has chalked up an impressive array of 14 solo albums to date, with several Grammy awards. As well as being a band leader in his own right he has been a much sought-after session musician, playing and recording with a stellar list of legendary musicians; Billy Cobham, Jaco Pastorius, The Brecker Brothers, Bob Berg, The Yellowjackets and of course, Miles Davis.



This spring, in 2015, Mike was in the UK playing a series of 'sell out' nights at Ronnie Scott's with ex-Steps Ahead drummer Steve Smith, trumpet legend Randy Brecker and bass virtuoso Janek Gwizdala. The band played a blistering two sets, drawing on a mix of material from Stern's impressive back catalogue, delighting the audience by closing the evening with an assured and impassioned rendition of Jimi Hendrix's 'Red House' with Mike impressing on lead vocals.

After the gig I had the pleasure of meeting Mike and asked him where he'd been hiding that voice all this time? He told me it was something he'd just started doing recently. (In fact you can find him sharing vocal duties on this track with Eric Johnson on their current LP 'Eclectic')

I'd been in touch with Mike prior to the gig and sent him a few questions. I began by asking him if he had any plans to record with the current lineup of Brecker, Smith and Gwizdala?

***It's always possible. They're great musicians.***

You studied at Berklee College of Music in Boston can you describe a little about life as a student there?

***It was a really good time. I used to practice a lot of hours and study with really good teachers. It was a great time in the 70's. I thought I sounded terrible when I first started with Pat, but he was very encouraging. Mick Goodrick was the same way. Both those guys are amazing players.***

Do you still get nervous before gigs?

***No, but I used to get really nervous. By playing in front of people more and more you get over it. Even just doing jam sessions.***

Many people may be surprised that throughout your illustrious career you've regularly continued studying with a teacher.

***I studied with Charlie Banacos for years. He just passed and I am in the process of getting with Gary Dial that teaches the same thing. Music is endless. The more you know the less you know. I feel like I don't know anything after all these years.***

How much has studying with a teacher had an impact on your writing and improvising down the years?

***Ultimately music is a language and like any language you have to learn the logistics of the language. In the case of music it comes down to playing the language and listening to people that are more fluid. Knowing the logistics of any language helps amazingly.***

Like most jazz musicians you're a compulsive transcriber and you famously started out transcribing a Joe Pass solo whilst at Berklee. Do you recall which one it was and can you offer any advice and encouragement for anyone starting out with this?

***I forget the solo but it was a blues in G on a record called intercontinental. It was a trio. It was Eberhard Weber and Shelly Manne, I think. It's a beautiful record. Advice? Transcribing is a challenge but just do a little bit at a time. To me it's been very helpful.***

Your compositions contain such a broad range of emotional content and show a deep love and understanding of many styles of music as well as jazz, and your albums "Who let the Cat's Out?", "Big Neighbourhood" and your recent collaboration with Eric Johnson, "Eclectic", definitely showcase this. How much of a challenge is it for you to combine all these different styles in a live setting.

***It seems like whatever I do comes pretty naturally because of the influences I grew up with. I love to sound like a horn sometimes.***

You've often spoken of what an inspiration Miles was to you, is it possible to describe what you learned from him, and what can guitarists learn from other instrumentalists?

***Miles had such a singing tone; I always try to get that on the guitar. Guitarists can learn a lot from listening to other instrumentalists.***

You once said "It's a gift to love music, but it takes effort and patience to keep it watered." Do you have any words of advice for guitarists reading this regarding setting up a regular practice routine and keeping their garden free of weeds.

***That's a good question. I would say try to schedule it no matter how you're feeling, you just go to work. Try to schedule something for an hour, then 30 minutes on something else so you get a routine. Even if you practice an hour a day it adds up.***

If you were to compile a "Desert Island Disc" of your five favourite jazz LPs, from any period, what would they be?

***It's impossible to say but just off the top of my head. Kind Of Blue, Blue Trane, The Real McCoy, Wes Montgomery Smokin' At The Half Note and Twelve by Sonny Stitt.***

As the crowds drifted onto Frith Street outside Ronnie Scott's club in the small hours of Sunday morning I reflected on what was a truly memorable gig and one I would most definitely put down as an all-time favourite.



It was an absolute treat meeting Mike Stern, he not only comes across as a warm and genuine individual with a deep love, passion and total commitment for what he does, but also a musician who's willing to find time for his audience, even after an epic 3 hour performance he happily popped out 'front of house' at 'Ronnie's' to chat. Ever keen to grow as a musician his writing on each subsequent album release continues to get better, stronger and more diverse. His playing, whilst still displaying that wonderful technical control, is married with a real sense of lyricism and maturity.

Mike Stern has continued to make jazz guitar relevant and exciting to a new audience whilst still keeping the jazz purists licking their lips in satisfaction with each new album release. With Stern talking of taking his writing into larger ensembles and possibly into the big band format, plus the added recent dimension of his vocal skills, the future looks incredibly exciting for Stern fans the world over.

- (1) Mike Stern Guitar Instructional DVD Featuring Live Performances at the 55 Bar in New York City (Rittor Music, Inc. 2001).
- (2) Guitar Webinars DVD, Jazz Notes : Mike Stern (Guitar Webinars 2012)