

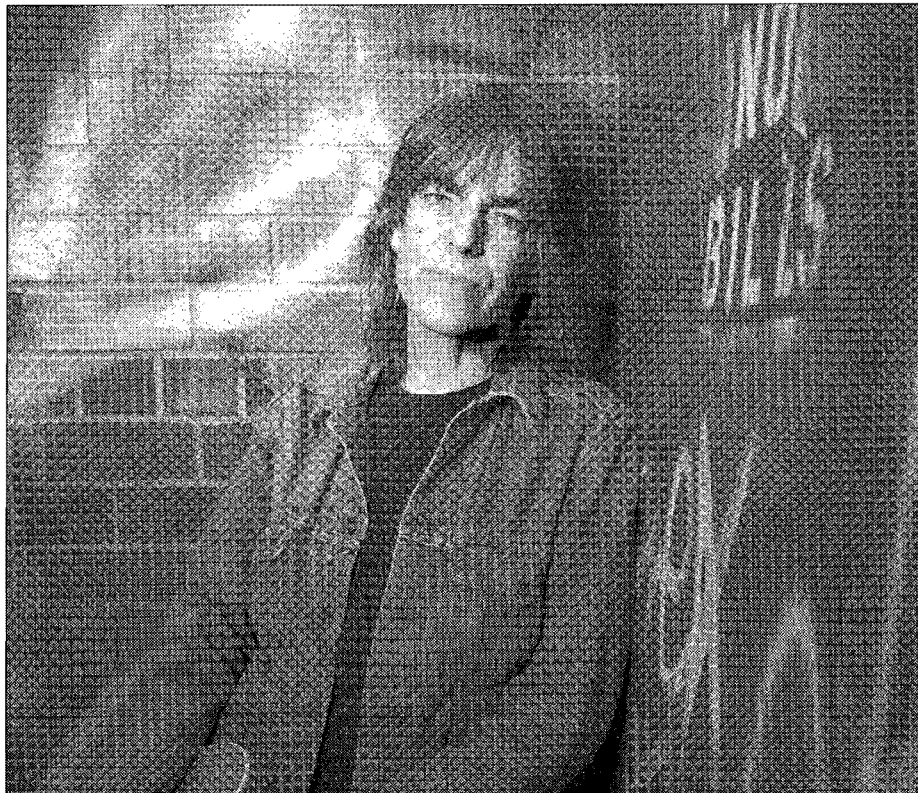
# Mike Stern

*by Shaun McNamara*

As an eclectic interpreter of all things musical, with a solid base in Jazz, Mike Stern is a preeminent guitarist/composer in his own works as well as the go-to-guy for such musical luminaries as Miles Davis (during his comeback in the early 80s – and beyond), Jaco Pastorius, the Brecker Brothers Band, and a band full of top-notch musicians – Blood, Sweat, & Tears.

Big Neighborhood is the stellar follow-up to Stern's 2006 album Who Let the Cats Out?, and with an aggressively daunting list of tour dates, which you can view at [www.mikestern.org](http://www.mikestern.org), he's spreading all the subtlety of winding alleys and intimate backyards along with the busy thoroughfare of that inimitable main street far and wide.

**METRONOME:** I know that every musician wants their next album to be the best, from first to last, and you've definitely achieved that with Big Neighborhood. My favorite tune is "Moroccan Roll" because I love the aggressive call and answer parts that are going on right up front in the song. Tell me a little bit about the development of the album. Did you have the complete concept in mind or did it evolve? The album from start to finish, including the wide array of players, creates a very "big neighborhood" feel.



Then we did the same thing with Steve Vai, except Lionel didn't come out to L.A. because I wanted to get Dave Weckl on those sessions, and he's in L.A., so that worked out really well. It's so important to be there for this kind of music, to get that groove in the moment, even if someone changes stuff around later.

**METRONOME:** How was it working with such contrasting styles as Steve Vai and Eric Johnson, in terms of them playing the music you had written as well as offering their own interpretation?

Mike: Eric had the flu a couple of weeks before the session and couldn't listen to the demo that much beforehand, but we had a rehearsal with him the night before, so it all came together. Also, I don't like to write really hard music in general because I find that I can't recreate it live when people don't have that much time. Also, I did want them to be able to put their own stuff in and not be struggling.

As far as the interpretation, they were completely cool and had really great instincts. Eric had this whole chord thing on "Long Time Gone." He put these beautiful chords on that. He also plays on "6th Street." He played great solos on that stuff. He played a few solos, gave us a choice, and just let it go. He actually said, "I hope you guys get something you can use." Well, it turned out that there was tons of stuff. He played great, and he brought his sound. It

Mike: It kind of evolved. I like some variety on records, and the last couple have been more of that than in the past. Most of the time I use one or two drummers, but I like to change it up. On Who Let the Cats Out?, there were many more players, but Big Neighborhood is more adventurous in the sense of including Eric Johnson and Steve Vai. I'm a fan of theirs, but we're in different worlds. I'm more of a Jazz player, but we have a lot of common ground. After listening to them for so long, I thought it would be cool to see if they were interested in playing on one of my records. And both of them were interested, so I was very happy.

After that was in place, I kind of went on impulse with certain things. I've always wanted to do something with Medeski, Martin, and Wood. I really dig them, even before John Scofield did his records with them. With Esperanza Spalding it was the same thing. Terri Lynn Carrington, who has worked with me and toured with me, and Esperanza were playing in a special project at the Red Sea Jazz Festival in Israel. I was playing there too, and it gave me the opportunity to ask Terri Lynn to play on what was to become Big Neighborhood, but since Esperanza was there too, and I love her work, I asked her as well and it all just worked out. So that's how this all happened. It was impulsive and yet kind of intuitively thought out. You have to just go for it sometimes and hope that it sounds like a cohesive record. I had one or two tunes in mind for all the people that I asked to play, but I just approached putting it all together instinctually, and I think it worked out. There's a lot of variety with Randy Brecker as well, and he's touring in my band as a special featured artist. He's amazing.



Cindy Blackman is on Big Neighborhood as well. I've known her from the Boston days, but we never played together, so I just asked her to play on this record. I also did some work on one of her records recently.

In large part, I'm realizing that writing all the songs, arranging them, and playing on everything helps to unify. I had to really think it through so that there was a good balance of moods for the recording, as well as who should play on what. At that point you have to have an idea of the possible sequence – even before you start recording. You can obviously juggle it around a bit after the fact, but it's good to

work a lot of it out ahead of time. Because I'll tell you man, a Jazz budget ain't that big.

**METRONOME: Speaking of budget, how did you work out the actual recording process for so many different people that are separated, not only by musical genre, but actual location?**

Mike: Everyone was very cool about the process. I wanted to do it all live in the studio, so there was a lot of travel involved. Eric Johnson couldn't come to New York, so I went out to Austin, Texas with Lionel Cordew (drums), Lincoln Goines (bass) – both of whom I play with a lot - and our producer, Jim Beard.

was awesome.

With Steve, we were late getting to L.A. because the flight was late – as usual – and then we hit tons of traffic, so we only had a half-hour rehearsal, but he had already sussed it all out. He had that “Moroccan Roll” line, and he just burned it. I didn't know how to explain to Steve, and everyone, how to approach the song. I wanted kind of a Middle Eastern vibe, whatever the hell that is, so I figured, well, maybe more ride cymbal. They were playing it funkier. Dave (Weckl) was playing it tight, and I said, It needs to be more open the way I'm hearing it, and he got it right away. Dave can do things in a million different ways. He's an incredible musician. He's a bit crazy with the drums. When you go on the road with him (and he's been on the road with me a lot), he really wants the drums a certain way so that he can play his ass off back there. But he works his ass off to get it all together by himself. I'd much rather have somebody that passionate about it – how he wants to sound, and he gets the music so quickly, and he offers a lot of options. Steve immediately got the vibe in terms of the notes, but like I said, they were both playing it a bit funkier than I wanted. So I asked Steve if he had heard of this Pakistani singer, Nusrat Fateh Ali Khan, who actually died about 10 years ago. He was a really famous Pakistani singer. If you ask anybody from Pakistan about him, he's on the level of the Beatles or Sinatra over there. And he really sang some soulful shit. “Moroccan Roll” isn't really something he would do, but I was looking for that vibe to the music. So Steve says to me, “Oh, I almost played with him.” So, as soon as I mentioned his name, Steve got what I was looking for right away. He said that he had this Sitar guitar, so

he used a bit of that for overdubbing, but basically everything was live. The solos were essentially live except for a few fixes here and there, but we just went for it, and I think the live element really came through. We played together in the studio. We were all there playing at the same time. I like that because shit just happens so quickly that you'd never be able to figure it out. A lot of times you respond to stuff subconsciously, sometimes consciously, but always in that immediate live environment – whether it's in a studio or on stage.

**METRONOME: In contrast to Who Let the Cats Out?, what did you go into Big Neighborhood wanting to do differently, in terms of production and other elements?**

Mike: Production-wise, I was really happy. Jim Beard is just great and I love what he does, but I wanted Big Neighborhood to rock a little bit more. Especially when I figured out that I was going to get Eric and Steve. Also, the tunes themselves evolved that way. No matter who's playing them, you think about the vibe of the tune. The title track, "Big Neighborhood," has a Hendrix kind of vibe, so I wanted to figure out how to build upon that. And some of the songs were done at the recording date, literally. I figured out, you know, it sounds kind of cool with just me and Steve playing at the beginning with just bass drum and a little high-hat for time; no bass, no band yet. So for the first melody – the A section of that tune – it's just me and Steve Vai, and then the band comes in for the second A section.

**METRONOME: Tell me a little bit about how your style has developed and transitioned over the years. All the guitar parts on Big Neighborhood embrace your very melodic quality, but the contrast with other playing styles really puts a spotlight on your unique sound.**

Mike: Most of the time I'm practicing Bee Bop, listening to horn players and trying to get that phrasing into my style. You can even hear that when I'm rocking out on the first tune. That's where I've been coming from for the last bunch of years. Originally, when I started learning guitar, I was listening to Jimi Hendrix, Jeff Beck, and Eric Clapton with Cream, and a lot of Blues guys like B.B. King, Buddy Guy, and all those cats. But my priority as a Jazz player is listening to Sonny Rollins, John Coltrane, and of course Miles – in all their different periods – especially Miles. Of course, I like his more electric stuff, but I love his more traditional stuff too.

**METRONOME: You can't have worked with Miles Davis in the way that you did, and then not always hear that horn echoing in your head?**

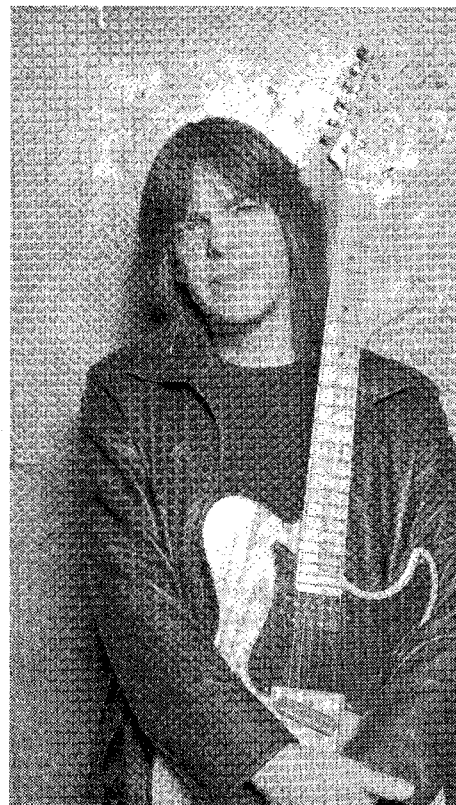
Mike: Exactly! That's really true. And also his way reinforced my way of thinking about music; it can go in many different places. You try and keep your own voice, which he was the master at. He kept his own voice throughout all the different styles he would surround himself with. Bitches Brew was very different from Kind of Blue, but it's still Miles Davis. And I loved that about him. He was wide open and he would let his heart guide him as to what he would or wouldn't do. He wouldn't talk himself out of it and say, well that doesn't have enough chords or something. I remember him telling me about the first time he heard Hendrix; he said, "That was a motherfucker. I heard "Machine Gun," that shit knocked me out." He related that story to me one afternoon, all excited, and on the same day – in the morning – he was talking about how great it was playing with Bird (Charlie Parker). So, that's where he was at, wide open to all kinds of shit, which is beautiful. Being a guitar player,

and I think the guitar kind of leads you in that direction if you let it, because it's an instrument that you hear in a lot of different kinds of music, you automatically relate on some level.

**METRONOME: Talking about developing your sound and your hand-stamped style (I can't hear one of your tunes being played and not know that it's you), you've always maintained an earthy feel. Is that something that you've inherently had or did you develop that early on, maybe when you were working with Blood, Sweat, & Tears?**

Mike: I think I've inherently had that. I appreciate you saying that because I feel like that is definitely where I come from, somehow. I guess that whatever I do musically, there is always some Blues in the mix, and it glues everything together. It keeps it all in a certain place that's part of my musical personality. So, whether I'm rocking or swinging out, or playing more lyrically, there's always some kind of Blues, whether it's a more gutsy kind of Blues or with a lighter feeling and a medium swing. Miles used to call me "Fat Time." He actually wrote a tune with a long guitar solo called "Fat Time." That was my nickname with him. Then I lost the weight and he started calling me "Time." He said, "no more Fat Time, okay, Time!"

Mike Stern's rich history, soulful, passionate playing, and earthy feel have all been burned onto Big Neighborhood, a must have for the Jazz-minded and every passionate musician and listener working their way across genres. The name Mike Stern never ends up in print or conversation without the word eclectic, and reproducing the live feeling of his CDs at a living, breathing show is a must see. We had him in Boston at the Regattabar for Tuesday/Wednesday gigs in May, but looking at his



schedule online ([www.mikestern.org](http://www.mikestern.org)) I began to think we might never see him again. Mike assured me though, he wants to get back in the Spring of 2010 (possibly April). In the interim, check out Big Neighborhood and Mike's entire catalog, as well as New Morning – The Paris Concert with Dave Weckl, Tom Kennedy, and Bob Franceschini.