



MODERN JAZZ GIANT

MIKE STERN IS ONE OF THE MOST important figures in modern jazz guitar. After erupting onto the scene as the fiery young soloist in several of Miles Davis's 1980s bands, he issued a string of thrilling solo albums, culminating in the recent GRAMMY®-nominated *Big Neighborhood*. Over the years Stern has perfected a distinctive solo style that melds fluid bebop lines with funky inflections steeped in blues and rock.

Stern recently spoke to us from his home in New York City, where he was enjoying a brief stopover between a European tour and a series of Japanese concerts.



WHAT INTRIGUES YOU MUSICALLY THESE DAYS?

I'm always trying to learn new stuff. I transcribe lots of solos by horn players—I love listening to tenor sax players and trying to get some of that sound on the guitar. For instance, right now I'm transcribing a Sonny Rollins solo. I'll write it out and then read through it, absorbing some of the ideas. I won't necessarily memorize it, but I'll try to let it lead me to new ideas of my own.

DOES THAT TAKE YOU PLACES YOU WOULDN'T GO IF YOU WERE ONLY LISTENING TO OTHER GUITAR PLAYERS?

Definitely. I love other guitar players, but it's good to get away from that "guitaristic" way of thinking sometimes. When I study sax players, I try to duplicate the voice-like expression they get. I like listening to piano players too. I might not be able to reproduce everything a pianist does, but I get close, and the process suggests new ideas, new ways of phrasing—a whole different approach.

WHICH NON-GUITARISTS HAVE HAD THE BIGGEST IMPACT ON YOUR SOUND?

Probably John Coltrane and Sonny Rollins on saxophone. On piano, McCoy Tyner and Bill Evans. Then there are the guys I was fortunate to work with, like Miles Davis and Jaco Pastorius, plus all the players that I'm lucky enough to have play in my bands. I learn a lot from listening to Dave Weckl play drums. There are a lot of influences out there if you want to take advantage of them!

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YOU'VE ALWAYS PLAYED A SOLIDBODY GUITAR WITH A BOLT-ON NECK, AS OPPOSED TO THE HOLLOWBODIES FAVORED BY MANY JAZZ PLAYERS. HOW DID THAT CHOICE COME ABOUT?

Because I started off as a blues-rocker. As a kid in the '60s, I was listening to Jimmy Hendrix and B.B. King, that kind of stuff. I also got exposed to classical music through my mom, who played piano and always had a lot of classical records around the house, as well as jazz. But I never left those blues-rock roots behind, and I've always played solidbody guitars.

SO WHAT WERE YOUR GOALS WHEN YOU COLLABORATED WITH YAMAHA TO CREATE THE MIKE STERN SIGNATURE MODEL GUITAR?

I wanted a Tele-style model, but with a warmer sound. The body is a bit heavier than on most solidbodies. It sounds darker and warmer—a bit closer to a hollowbody sound. And the older mine gets, the better it sounds. Yamaha did a great job on it. They make beautiful guitars.

DO YOU PLAY EXCLUSIVELY WITH A PICK, OR DO YOU FINGERPICK AS WELL?

Mostly with a pick, though sometimes I play with my thumb like Wes Montgomery did. Sometimes I play like Danny Gatton did, gripping the pick while also using my fingers. Sometimes on ballads I palm the pick and use my fingers to play chord solos, but whichever method I use, I try to make the notes sound as vocal as possible. When we talk or sing, not every syllable is accented the same. The inflection goes up and down. We don't talk like robots—there's a fluidity to it. So even when I use a pick for every note, I try to play so that certain peak notes stand out, and others are more swallowed.

IS TEACHING A BIG PART OF YOUR LIFE?

I love teaching. I haven't had enough time for it, though I've been thinking about it more and more. I've been on the road pretty much since I started playing with Blood, Sweat & Tears when I was 22, and I've been touring with my own band for almost 25 years. Believe me, I am incredibly grateful to have gotten a chance to do all of this! But now I'm starting to think it might be great to stay home and get a teaching gig. I know I'll always want to play, but I can get lost in music anywhere—I don't necessarily have to be onstage. I'm telling you, man—I still get lost in it! Music is an endless language. After all these years, I haven't even scratched the surface.