

Mike Stern
Master class
25-10-2011

Turning up to the George IV pub on Chiswick High Road on a Tuesday afternoon to listen to what Mike Stern had to say about music was a treat indeed. It's not every day that you get to spend time with a musician who has played with Miles Davis, Billy Cobham, Jaco Pastorius and has a few Grammy Nominations under his belt.

Tech Music School seems to have made a very welcome habit of organising Master Classes for their students with some of the music world's most inspirational and highly thought of musicians. Even recent visits by Guthrie Govan, Steve Gadd and Paul Gilbert, all world class players in their own fields, couldn't prevent students and teachers alike responding with unprecedented glee at the news Mike Stern would be dropping in.

Boston born Stern started off by telling audience members how he started out playing guitar. Like many of the greats his earliest love was for Blues, Rock n Roll and Motown and he professed that he learned loads by playing along to the records of his favourite artists, a route that many of the great guitarists seem to have followed.

Mike mentioned that his mother was a piano player who used to play lots of classical music around the Stern family home and that there would often be a jazz record on the family record player. It is easy to trace these early influences through to the fluid, expressive style he possesses today.

Our American visitor appeared exceptionally relaxed throughout the event and it seemed as though he genuinely loved talking about his musical experiences with an eager audience. When he announced that it is some of the simplest music that he hears that really touches his heart there were plenty of nods of agreement among the audience.

Mike revealed how he used to take jazz records up to his room as a child and attempt to learn the tunes he loved. It was nice to hear him admit that he used to get lost after a couple of bars! Mind you, he did mention that quite early on in his attempts to transcribe he picked a pretty tricky Joe Pass tune!

When Mike spoke of his time at Berkley he reflected that learning there was often a slow process and that it frequently felt "like pulling teeth", which I think might just be a sentiment all those in attendance could identify with.

Mike mused that he often thought music was like learning a new language and that the only way to master either is to fully submerge yourself in your chosen topic. The audience were told that at some stage, if they hadn't already done so, that they'd have to accept that working towards achieving a high level of mastery of your instrument is going to be awkward at times and not always fun, but that the long term result will mean any frustrations are well worth it.

It was suggested that practicing is like an act of faith; that you have to trust with no guarantee that the hard work and investment in time, energy and effort will be worth it in the long run. I

can certainly identify with that concept.

Mike was accompanied on stage by bass tutor Rob Statham and drum tutor Elliott Henshaw and the first song they played together was "Autumn Leaves". This dazzling performance showcased Mike's mind-blowing command of his instrument as a tool for expression. He spoke afterwards of his belief that transcribing and listening to the music he loved had the biggest impact on expanding his musical vocabulary.

Time was devoted to discussing Mike's sound and he talked us through his custom Yamaha "Tele" guitar and the Chorus unit that helps give him his distinctive sound. Mike spoke of how he was trying to mimic a vocal and horn like sound when searching for his tone.

It was fascinating hearing guitarists such as Pat Metheny and John Scofield spoken about on a personal level, such is Stern's standing in the jazz world that he can consider these two greats not only equals, but friends.

During the afternoon Mike also spoke of his friendship with Danny Gatton, of his time playing with bass playing virtuosos Jaco Pastorius and Marcus Miller and how playing with musicians of this standing elevated his own playing.

There was one name the audience were desperate to hear their guest talk about and that was jazz legend Miles Davis, for whom Mike Stern played during his come-back era. Mike spoke with obvious delight about his time playing with this musical genius and gave some fascinating insights into how it was to be in a rehearsal room with one of the most heralded musicians of the Twentieth Century.

The audience were treated to three tunes in total and the second offered up was a ballad composed by Mike Stern himself called "Wing and a Prayer". After this occasionally mournful and contrastingly uplifting composition Mike devoted some time to discussing his songwriting experiences and spoke of the need to maintain self-belief and commitment to your artistic output.

Mike spent time answering questions from eager students and subjects covered included improvising over static vamps, practice schedules, playing over changes, vocalising lines and the importance of a sound understanding of harmony.

The final song played was a Sonny Rollins tune called "Sonny Moon for Two" which was a raucous arrangement featuring rousing playing by Mike and wonderful solos by both halves of the rhythm section made up by Tech Music School tutors Rob and Elliott.

Throughout his short stay with us, Mike Stern demonstrated that he is not just a very nice man and a fantastic guitarist, but that he is also a humble, exceptionally gifted musician only too willing to pass on his knowledge to young, aspiring musicians.

Review by Paul Jenkinson (BMus student)