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GUITARIST MIKE STERN PLAYS WITH TALENTED FRIENDS IN A *BIG NEIGHBORHOOD*

**Guest artists on new recording include Steve Vai, Eric Johnson,
Esperanza Spalding, Richard Bona, Randy Brecker,
Medeski Martin & Wood, Cindy Blackman and others**

Six-time GRAMMY® nominated guitarist Mike Stern's music has always come from a colorful and diverse part of town – a place where numerous artistic styles converge to create a fresh sound that's rooted in jazz but refuses to adhere to rigid borders. Since his earliest recordings, this former bandmate of Miles Davis, Jaco Pastorius, Billy Cobham and other high-profile innovators has grafted elements of rock, blues, soul and more to his solid jazz foundations. On Stern's street, anybody who brings a sense of energy, eclecticism and passion to the craft of music is welcome to play.

Stern invites fans and newcomers alike into his rich and diverse little corner of the world with the August 11, 2009, worldwide release of *Big Neighborhood* (HUCD 3157) on Heads Up International, a division of Concord Music Group. Aiding Stern in this latest chapter of his never-ending quest for the new and better groove is a long list of talented guests: guitarists Steve Vai and Eric Johnson; bassist-vocalists Esperanza Spalding and Richard Bona; jamband godfathers Medeski Martin & Wood; drummers Dave Weckl, Terri Lyne Carrington, Cindy Blackman and Lionel Cordew; bassists Chris Minh Doky and Lincoln Goines, and several others.

With a crew this large and diverse, the idea of the album title should be pretty clear, says Stern. "Music is like a big neighborhood – a place where anything and everything can happen," he explains. "You can find all kinds of things in a big neighborhood – all kinds of different people, all kinds of different ideas and perspectives, and of course, all kinds of different sounds."

With all of this going on in a single recording, Stern's primary objective was to capture the energy as live as possible, with few if any overdubs. This was no easy task, as a few of the artists had schedules that prohibited meeting in a central location. Consequently, while Stern was able to record a good part of the album in his hometown of New York City, he had to travel (with rhythm section) to Austin, Texas to record with Eric Johnson, and then to Los Angeles to record with Steve Vai and Dave Weckl. In the end, the album's eleven tracks came together in a neighborhood that spans two coasts with a stop in the Lone Star State.

"This record is in a lot of places – not just in terms of where it was recorded, but in the various voices and styles that are represented," says Stern. "There's jazz here, there's rock, there's Latin, there are

elements of Middle Eastern music. I dig records like that. Basically, I guess the thread that hopefully holds all this together is the fact that I wrote all the tunes on this project, I play on all of them, and the concept of how all this fits together is mine with some great help from the guy that produced the record, Jim Beard. I hear it when I'm writing. I'll think, 'This song has kind of an African groove, so I should get Richard Bona to play on it,' or 'This song has a melodic groove, which is perfect for Esperanza.' I just follow my instincts and pick the tunes that will all work together on one record, and will show off what each person can do."

Big Neighborhood opens with the churning, rocked-up title track, in which Stern and Vai face off and create a thundering wall of distorted guitar riffs. "This tune obviously comes out of a Jimi Hendrix inspiration," says Stern. "Steve rocks it with so much attitude. Along with the technique, he also has a lot of humor in his playing, which I love." Vai reappears several tracks later in the Middle-Eastern flavored "Moroccan Roll," a song inspired by the exotic music of Nusrat Fateh Ali Khan, the Pakistani vocalist who appeared on a number of recordings by Peter Gabriel, Eddie Vedder and other rock and pop artists of the West in the '80s and '90s.

Bassist-vocalist Esperanza Spalding and drummer Terri Lyne Carrington make a compelling team on three consecutive tracks – "Song for Pepper," "Coupe de Ville" and "Bird Blue," all of which follow understated arrangements to make room for the tight counterpoint set up by the two featured musicians. "Esperanza's voice knocks me out," says Stern. "She sings so beautifully, and she and Terri Lyne sound amazing together on all the tracks they're on. Esperanza does this vocalese thing, where she's not really singing words. She just comes up with these vowel sounds and syllables that are beautiful in the context of the music."

For the shimmering and funky "Check One," Stern enlists the services of keyboardist John Medeski, drummer Billy Martin and bassist Chris Wood – the seamless jazz-funk trio better known as Medeski Martin & Wood – along with fiery saxophonist Bob Malach. "Medeski Martin & Wood have an incredible vibe together," says Stern. "We didn't get the chance to rehearse, but we didn't really need to. We just went into the studio and got it in a couple takes. I just let them do what they do."

Laid back but engaging at the same time, "Hope You Don't Mind" features trumpeter Randy Brecker, a long-time collaborator with Stern. The guitar and horn weave effortlessly in and out of an intriguing melody, each taking plenty of space to foray into solo territory. Pianist Jim Beard, bassist Chris Minh Doky and drummer Cindy Blackman hold it all together. "I played with the Brecker Brothers over the years," Stern recalls, "and Randy and I continue to do a lot of touring together. We have several dates lined up in the fall and through the end of the year. Given how much we've been working together, I just wanted him to be a part of this record."

Mike Stern's ***Big Neighborhood*** is an open community where everyone is welcome. Everyone has something worthwhile to say, and everyone is given plenty of room to say it. "The thing that really gets me going is listening to all these very different artists on this record interpret my songs," says Stern. "In the end, everything is unified by the mere fact that there's a lot of spirit and a lot of fun in the music. That's really the common thread. There's just that vibe that emerges when good musicians play their hearts out. Nothing else really matters as far as I'm concerned...I think anyone who likes any of these artists will really dig what they did on this record."

Big Neighborhood was nominated for a GRAMMY® Award for Best Contemporary Jazz Album.

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