

MUSICIAN



Mike Crane

ERIC JOHNSON & MIKE STERN

Two guitar wizards on one album mean twice the musical magic

By Jeff Tamarkin

BY ANY MEASURE, ERIC JOHNSON AND MIKE STERN ARE two of the most accomplished guitarists in recent history, but it's doubtful anyone ever considered they'd make an album together. Stern, after all, is a renowned jazz artist, having had his initial breakthrough in the '80s as a member of Miles Davis' band. Johnson, on the other hand, is a stone rocker—a shredding wiz whose music incorporates myriad elements and influences.

Each of their credentials is stunning. Johnson earned his first Grammy nomination in 1987. Four additional Grammy nods followed, including a Best Rock Instrumental Performance win in 1991 for his signature song, "Cliffs of Dover." Meanwhile, Stern is a six-time Grammy nominee who's been hailed by countless publications, including *Downbeat*, which named him to its 75 Great Guitarists list.

Longtime mutual admirers, Austin native Johnson and Boston-born Stern kicked around the idea of working together for a while.

Eventually they did some gigs to see how it would go before heading to the studio for their new collaborative effort, *Eclectic*. Recorded with Chris Maresh of Johnson's band on bass and Anton Fig of *Late Show With David Letterman*'s house band on drums, *Eclectic*'s dozen tracks—including original songs by Johnson and Stern and a knockout remake of Jimi Hendrix's "Red House"—find both guitarists creating powerful music that blurs genre distinctions.

"I always dug the way Eric played, and his sound and sensibility," says Stern, 62. "But when we played together it was even more obvious. We got a really good sound."

Adds Johnson, 60, who produced the album, "Most people's first impression is that my thing is coming from rock and Mike is from jazz, but if you look inside our playing styles, you see there's something going on besides that. It really comes down to whether it's good music or not."

'One common denominator we have is that we want a sound that's got a lot of air.' —Mike Stern

**How did you meet?**

STERN: Chris Maresh introduced us at B.B. King's in New York when Eric was playing. Chris said that Eric wanted to meet me, and maybe we could do something together. That was 10 years ago. Then a few years ago I did a record called *Big Neighborhood* and asked Eric to play on it. That was the first time we played together.

JOHNSON: I had actually seen Mike play with Miles Davis many years ago, and he was such a colorful player. I was really impressed with that. After I played on *Big Neighborhood*, we both wanted to do something but we were busy and it never happened. Then the [New York jazz club] Blue Note called and said, "Hey, do you want to do some gigs?" and that was the start.

STERN: After the Blue Note we did a short East Coast tour. Then we did the record together and another tour, which was really fun.

'It's inspiring—plus I can steal stuff from him.'

—Eric Johnson

How do you mesh your styles?

STERN: We give each other lots of space. We're eager to hear each other play. We're listening to each other so it works out musically. Also the texture of our sounds on the electric guitar is similar. Eric has a really cool piano thing happening sometimes on the guitar because he plays piano, so he has amazing voicings.

JOHNSON: Our sounds are pretty different. A lot of Mike's sound is in the middle registers, and mine tends to be more of a bass and treble thing. He fits somewhere in between my sound. It brings a deeper dimension to the music when you hook up with someone who does something you don't, or is more proficient in areas where you might just touch the surface. It's inspiring—plus I can steal stuff from him.

STERN: One common denominator we have is that we want a sound that's got a lot of air. Whenever you've got two chord instruments in a band, either somebody's got to lay out or you've got to really be careful when you come up together. You've got to leave a lot of stuff out and play more softly beneath the soloist.

The album touches on several genres.

STERN: Totally. I've always thought that there are many common denominators between jazz and rock. Now it's nearly normal for jazz guitar players to have rock influences. Part of that is just the nature of the guitar—it's in nearly every genre: pop, country, rock. Guitar players have the possibility of including more styles in their music.

JOHNSON: Mike is predominantly a jazz player but he's a different kind of jazz player because most of his repertoire, vision and feel come from horn players more than guitar players. So he has a little different slant on the way he plays his lines. Plus he's got a lot of soul and fire.

How did you approach the recording?

JOHNSON: We recorded it at my studio in Austin. It's a nice big room we could all set up in and just play together. We both brought ideas and arranged them together so we had a hand in morphing them. It was more of a free exchange—everybody offered their input once we brought it to the studio. We cut the whole thing in three or four days—pretty much live—and spent another week or two mixing. We fixed and overdubbed a few little things but tried to do that as little as possible.

STERN: Pretty much we just hit it. I re-recorded some tunes that I already had, which I thought would sound good with that instrumentation, especially with Eric. Eric also did some of his own tunes. We also both wrote a couple of new tunes and rehearsed and recorded them. It happened really fast—the first or second take was usually cool. It's always better to get everybody into the studio at the same time, because so many ideas and arrangements come while you're rehearsing. Sometimes there are last-minute changes. When everybody chimes in, it's very organic.

JOHNSON: There are things I might have done differently, but maybe it's good that I didn't because it was an exercise for me to play live in the studio. If you embark on that it might take a little time for that muscle to get stronger, but I'd rather do that than go back and think, "Let me redo it." We made a conscious decision to just leave it.

Why cover Hendrix's "Red House"?

JOHNSON: My first thought was that there have been so many recordings of "Red House," do we need to do another? But it was 100 percent fun. It wasn't any kind of statement. We just wanted to play the tune. Mike wanted to do some singing. We put it at the end of the album so it would be a joyous encore.

PAIRS OF ACES

Five classic guitar duo albums worth owning



CHET ATKINS AND LES PAUL
Chester and Lester (1976)

Jazz great Paul was already semi-retired when country legend Atkins convinced him to square off in the studio. The musicians' tones merged flawlessly as they found the sweet spot between Nashville twang and classic swing.



CLARENCE "GATEMOUTH" BROWN AND ROY CLARK
Makin' Music (1979)

This album was all about country super-picker Clark dueling it out with blues master Brown. But "Gate" was also deeply steeped in country, resulting in sizzling jams—equal parts hoedown and roadhouse.



JIM HALL AND PAT METHENY
Jim Hall and Pat Metheny (1999)

Sometimes the players in these sessions interweave so seamlessly you can't always tell who's playing what. Hall was more of a traditionalist than the younger Metheny, but at times it's the elder who's jumping off cliffs while the upstart watches from above, in awe.



ALBERT KING AND STEVIE RAY VAUGHAN
In Session (1999)

Vaughan was still a fresh face when he and blues giant King cut this blistering live set, recorded for television in 1983. The album's material is mostly King's—but Vaughan's respect for the elder statesman is palpable, and King gives it right back.



NELS CLINE AND JULIAN LAGE
Room (2014)

Cline has long led a double life as Wilco's main axe-slinger and an unabashed experimentalist on his own projects. Here he teams up with former prodigy Lage, a leading jazz guitar innovator. This is a no-frills affair, and the results are startlingly fresh.

MUSICIAN



Eric Johnson, Mike Stern

Mac Orlan

'We both brought ideas and arranged them together so we had a hand in morphing them.' -Eric Johnson

STERN: Hendrix always had the blues in his music. I heard it right away in him. That's part of the reason I always thought there was some similarity between jazz and some rock—it was coming from blues. The big common denominator is the blues. All the cats I really dig who I've gotten the chance to play with or I've listened to, blues is all over the place.

What have you learned from each other during this project?

JOHNSON: I know about harmony and theory, but when it gets deep into jazz changes and soloing through more difficult changes I can do it, but Mike's fluent. He doesn't even have to think about it. There are certain places where that's the case with me. It's about learning more about music. STERN: A lot of stuff Eric does is kind of

tricky. He's coming from a different place, doing some pedal steel and banjo licks. Some of his playing and some of his voicings remind me of Bill Frisell. What Eric has going on is different from what I've prioritized for so many years. He takes me back to other aspects of the guitar because I've been so focused on getting horn lines and different phrasing on the guitar. He's just a soulful cat. He rocks like crazy—he can do all that—but he's also a very sensitive accompanist.

Dream collaboration, past or present?

STERN: John Coltrane, but I'd be happy just being the guy who changes his sax reeds. And Hendrix would have been amazing. JOHNSON: I'd love to play with Stevie Wonder. But I'd try anything with anybody who was up for it.

TOOLS OF THE TRADE

Not surprisingly, Eric Johnson and Mike Stern employ a small arsenal of gear, starting with an impressive lineup of guitars. Stern favors his own Yamaha Mike Stern Signature electric, modeled after a beloved Telecaster that was stolen years ago. He also uses a Martin D-45 acoustic.

Johnson's array includes a 1954 Fender Stratocaster as well as his own Signature Stratocaster, a '64 Gibson 335, a Martin Eric Johnson Signature acoustic, a Vincent Bell Coral sitar and a National lap steel. Johnson uses two Fender Deluxe Reverb amps, a Fulton Webb 50 watt and a Marshall 50 watt, and Stern sticks with two 1968 Fender reissue custom Silverface Twin Reverbs.

Stern's effects include a Boss DD-3 Digital Delay, Boss OverDrive and a Yamaha SPX90. Johnson's setup includes Dunlop Eric Johnson Fuzz Face, Cry Baby Wah, Ibanez Tube Screamer, electro-harmonix Memory Man, Boss DD-2, TC Electronic Chorus Flanger and a Maestro Echoplex.

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