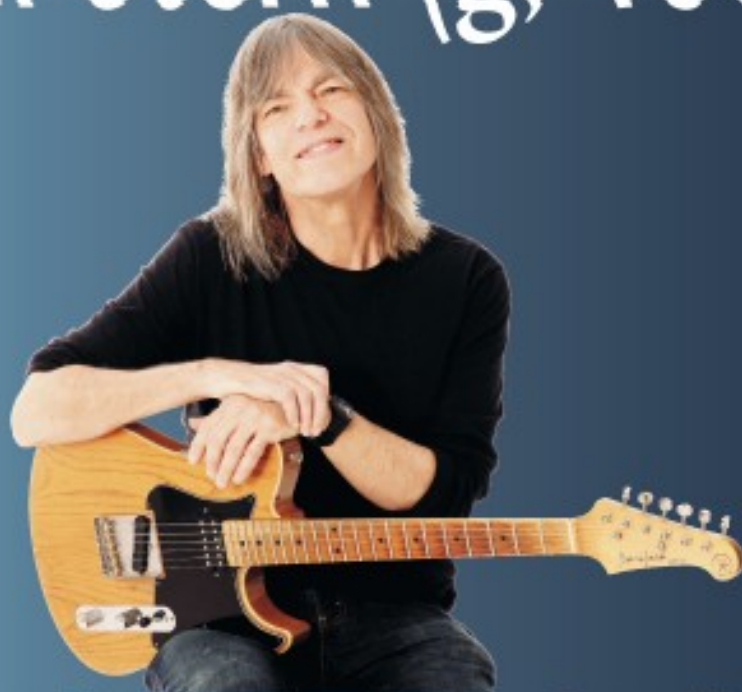


MIKE STERN (guitar)
Dennis Chambers (drums)
Hadrien Feraud (bass)
Bob Franceschini (sax)
Leni Stern (g, voc)



Mo. 13.05.2024, 20:30
M8, Mainz Mitternacht 8



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MIKE STERN

<http://www.mikestern.org/>

One of the great jazz guitarists of his generation, **Mike Stern** has the unique ability to play with the finesse and lyricism of Jim Hall, the driving swing of Wes Montgomery and the turbulent, overdriven attack of Jimi Hendrix. Growing up in the Washington, D.C. area, Stern revered all three of those guitar immortals, along with such potent blues guitarists as Albert and B.B. King. Aspects of those seminal influences can be heard in his playing on the 18 recordings he has released as a leader or in his acclaimed sideman work for Miles Davis, Billy Cobham, the Brecker Brothers, Jaco Pastorius, Steps Ahead, David Sanborn, Blood, Sweat & Tears, Joe Henderson and the all-star Four Generations of Miles band.

Stern's latest Concord Jazz release, *Eleven*, is an encounter with Grammy-winning keyboardist-composer-producer Jeff Lorber. Co-produced by bassist Jimmy Haslip, who had previously worked with the guitarist on the Yellowjacket's 2008 album, *Lifecycle*, this lively collaboration finds Stern at the peak of his powers, following on the heels of 2017's acclaimed *Trip*, his triumphant return to recording after a freak accident that threatened to end his career. The multiple Grammy-nominated guitarist was hailing a cab outside his apartment in Manhattan July 3, 2016 when he tripped over some hidden construction debris left in the street, fracturing both of his humerus bones (the long bones that run from the shoulder to the elbow) in the fall. Left with significant nerve damage in his right hand which prevented him from doing the simplest tasks, including holding a pick, Stern faced a series of surgeries and subsequent physical therapy before he could regain control of his nerve-damaged picking hand. And while *Trip* represented a strong comeback, the intrepid guitarist takes things up a notch on *Eleven*.

“When the idea was floated for this project, I asked a bunch of cats who worked with Jeff, like Randy Brecker, Dave Weckl and Bob Franceschini, and they all said, ‘He’s cool, he throws down, he can really get it going.’ And they’re right,” said Stern. “Jeff’s got a strong rhythmic groove and he comps really well on the Fender Rhodes, which is kind of his signature sound. And I feel like his music really comes more from soul music than smooth jazz. That Philly soul thing is definitely in some of his tunes on this record.”

Added Lobber of their first collaboration together, “Mike’s just a bebop wizard, he’s got an incredible jazz feeling. And by the same token, he’s got the rock and blues thing covered too. He’s on both sides of the musical spectrum. So when I heard he was up for it, I was delighted to have a chance to work with him in the studio on this project. And I think we really hit it off musically as well as personally.”

One of the top guitarists in jazz since his breakthrough days with Miles Davis' celebrated comeback band of the early 1980s, Stern has earned the respect of colleagues and critics alike while also exerting a towering influence on a generation of aspiring players. A guitarist of formidable technique, he continues to awe and inspire six-string aficionados with his seamless blend of bebop facility, scorching rock intensity and uncommon lyricism. As Jon Chappell of *Guitar* magazine noted, “Stern is not only a magician of the fretboard but a heartfelt and mature composer of great depth.” By combining the legato approach of jazz saxophone greats like John Coltrane, Sonny Rollins and Joe Henderson with a few touches from the rock camp (i.e., distortion and delay pedals along with some urgent string bending, courtesy of his boyhood blues heroes B.B. King and Buddy Guy), Stern has successfully fashioned a singular voice that comfortably occupies both rock and jazz worlds.

Born on January 10, 1953, he began playing guitar at age 12, emulating the likes of B.B. King, Eric Clapton and Jimi Hendrix. "I liked the feel of the guitar and I got hooked on it," he recalled in an interview. "But I didn't really get serious about it until I went to Berklee in 1971." At the Berklee College of Music in Boston his focus shifted to jazz as he began an intensive period of woodshedding, immersing himself in records by Miles Davis, John Coltrane, McCoy Tyner and Bill Evans while studying with guitarists Mick Goodrick and Pat Metheny. During his stint at Berklee, he developed a keen appreciation for jazz guitar greats Wes Montgomery and Jim Hall, both of whom would exert a huge influence on his own playing. On a recommendation from Metheny, Stern landed a gig with Blood, Sweat & Tears in 1976 and remained with the band for two years, appearing on the BS&T albums *More Than Ever* and *Brand New Day*. That gig is also significant for introducing the guitarist to two musicians who would later figure prominently in his life — percussionist Don Alias and bassist Jaco Pastorius.

Following his stint with BS&T, Stern returned to Boston and began studying privately with local jazz guru Charlie Banacos. In 1979, he joined Billy Cobham's powerhouse fusion band and two years later he joined Miles Davis' group, making his public debut with the band on June 27, 1981 at the Kix nightclub in Boston (a performance that was documented on the CBS live album, *We Want Miles*). Stern remained with Miles through 1983, also appearing on *Man With The Horn* and *Star People*. From 1983 to 1984, he toured in Jaco Pastorius' Word Of Mouth band and in 1985 returned to Miles for a second tour of duty that lasted close to a year.

In 1985, Stern made his recording debut as a leader with *Neesh* on the Japanese Trio label. A year later, he made his Stateside debut as a leader on Atlantic Records with *Upside Downside*, which featured such celebrated colleagues as alto saxophonist David Sanborn, tenor saxophonist Bob Berg, bassists Mark Egan, Jeff Andrews and Jaco Pastorius, keyboardist Mitch Forman and drummers Dave Weckl and Steve Jordan. In the summer of 1986, Stern took to the road with David Sanborn and later joined an electrified edition of Steps Ahead, which featured Mike Mainieri on midi vibes, Michael Brecker on the Electronic Wind Instrument (EWI), Darryl Jones on electric bass and Steve Smith on drums. That powerhouse fusion outfit was documented on *Live in Tokyo 1986*. Over the next two years, Stern was a member of Michael Brecker's potent quintet, appearing on the tenor titan's 1988 album, *Don't Try This At Home*.

Stern's second Atlantic album, 1988's *Time In Place*, continued the promise of his debut and featured Peter Erskine on drums, Jim Beard on keyboards, Jeff Andrews on bass, Don Alias on percussion and Don Grolnick on organ. He followed that success with 1989's *Jigsaw*, which was produced by fellow guitarist Steve Khan. Following the release of 1991's *Odds or Evens*, Stern joined a reunited Brecker Brothers Band in 1992 and became a key factor in the success of that popular group for the next two years. His decidedly jazzy 1993 Atlantic release, *Standards (And Other Songs)*, led to Stern being named Best Jazz Guitarist Of The Year by the readers and critics of *Guitar Player* magazine. He followed that success with two hard-hitting offerings in 1994's *Is What It Is* and 1996's *Between The Lines*, both of which received Grammy nominations.

In 1997, Stern returned to a jazzier aesthetic with *Give And Take*, a looser, more spontaneous session featuring bassist John Patitucci, drummer Jack DeJohnette, percussionist Don Alias and special guests Michael Brecker and David Sanbom. On the strength of that superbly swinging effort, which included freewheeling covers of Sonny Rollins' "Oleo," John Coltrane's "Giant Steps" and Cole Porter's "I Love You," along with a scintillating trio rendition of Jimi Hendrix's "Who Knows," he was awarded the Orville W. Gibson Award for Best Jazz Guitarist.

Stern's ninth release on Atlantic, 1999's *Play*, was a six-string summit meeting with fellow guitarists John Scofield and Bill Frisell. He followed with 2001's *Voices*, his first album to employ singers (Arto Tunçboyacıyan, Elizabeth Kantomanou, Richard Bona) and 2004's *These Times*, which featured guest turns from banjo ace Bela Fleck and alto saxophonist Kenny Garrett. 2006's *Who Let The Cats Out?* featured a bevy of bassists in Meshell Ndegeocello, Anthony Jackson, Richard Bona and Victor Wooten along with drummers Kim Thompson and Dave Weckl and harmonica ace Gregoire Maret and the late, great trumpeter Roy Hargrove.

At the Festival International de Jazz de Montréal in June 2007, Stern was honored with the Miles Davis Award, which was created to recognize internationally acclaimed jazz artists whose body of work has contributed significantly to the renewal of the genre. Stern was also the artist in residence at the festival that summer of 2007, joining the renowned Yellowjackets for some electrifying live performances. Their kinetic chemistry was later documented on the 2008 studio collaboration *Lifecycle*, which was nominated for a Grammy for Best Contemporary Jazz Album.

The following year saw the release of his Grammy-nominated *Big Neighborhood*, which found Stern with guitar heroes Eric Johnson and Steve Vai, trumpeter Randy Brecker and jamband godfathers Medeski, Martin & Wood on a few tracks.

Stern was presented with *Guitar Player* magazine's Certified Legend Award on January 21, 2012. In June of that year, he released *All Over the Place*, which featured a delegation of high-caliber electric and acoustic bass players, including Esperanza Spalding, Richard Bona, Victor Wooten, Anthony Jackson, Dave Holland, Tom Kennedy, Will Lee and Victor Bailey. On 2014's *Eclectic*, Stern went toe-to-toe with Texas guitar slinger Eric Johnson, cutting a wide stylistic swath on eleven originals while showcasing their mutual love of Jimi Hendrix on a cover of his slow blues classic, "Red House." Recorded in three days at Johnson's studio in Austin, *Electric* was hailed as "a dazzling outing from two formidable, well-matched guitar heroes" by *Jazz Times* magazine.

The guitar great continued to play with peerless authority while flaunting prodigious chops on 2017's *Trip* and now exhibits that same impressive six-string prowess on *Eleven*.

DENNIS CHAMBERS

<https://www.dennischambers.com/>

Dennis Chambers (born May 9, 1959) is an American drummer who has recorded and performed with John Scofield, George Duke, Brecker Brothers, Santana, Parliament/Funkadelic, John McLaughlin, Niacin, Mike Stern, CAB, Greg Howe, Victor Wooten and many others. Despite a lack of formal training, Chambers has become well known among drummers for his technique and speed. Chambers is particularly regarded for his ability to play "in the pocket" but can also stretch very far out of the pocket which is also a hallmark of his technique. Chambers exhibits a powerful style that is technically proficient, yet highly musical and groove-oriented. He can play in a wide variety of musical genres, but is perhaps most notable for his jazz-fusion, funk, and Latin music playing. He is mostly known for his fast hands and triplets on the bass drum. He has helped many young drummers, the most prominent being Tony Royster, Jr.

In 2007, just before Led Zeppelin were scheduled to play at the O2 Arena in London, John Bonham's son Jason was asked in an interview that if he himself were to pass up the opportunity, which drummer would he recommend to fill the coveted drum throne. His reply was 'If I were to choose, I would probably want a jazz drummer with a strong swing feel. You know what - Dennis Chambers. I think he would "get it", whereas other rock drummers wouldn't.'

In an interview by Bonedo in 2011 Dennis Chambers was asked who some of his influences and favorite drummers were and he mentioned Clyde Stubblefield, Al Jackson Jr., Steve Gadd, Vinnie Colaiuta, Gary Husband, Jack DeJohnette, Billy Cobham, Buddy Rich, Elvin Jones, Roy Haynes, and Tony Williams.

He performed on the critically acclaimed Maceo Parker live album "Roots and Grooves" album with long time friend Rodney "Skeet" Curtis (bass) and the WDR Big Band. He has toured extensively with Carlos Santana and makes appearances with his band Niacin.

He plays and endorses Pearl drums, pedals, hardware & racks, Zildjian cymbals, Zildjian drumsticks & general accessories and Evans drumheads.

Chambers began drumming at the age of four years, and was gigging in Baltimore-area nightclubs by the age of six. He was recruited in 1981 by the Sugar Hill Label to be their "house drummer." Dennis plays on many Sugar Hill releases. In 1978 (at 18 years old) he joined Parliament/Funkadelic, and stayed with them until 1985. In 1986 he joined the John Scofield band. Since then he has played with most of the major figures in jazz fusion music.

On August 26, 2011 Chambers appeared as a featured drummer on the Late Show with David Letterman's Drum Solo Week II, alongside other such notable players as Tony Royster, Jr., Gavin Harrison, Neil Peart and Stewart Copeland.

HADRIEN FERAUD

<https://www.hadrienferaud.info/>

Hadrien FERAUD was born in August '84 in Paris.

He grew up in a family where music always played a very important role. At a young age his parents who used to be musicians, turned him onto music and various musical styles including rock, pop, blues, funk ,old school r&b, new wave, traditional, and jazz.

Early on, very attracted to cinema he shows a deep interest in movie scores and composers such as John Williams, Allan Silvestri, Jerry Goldsmith, James Horner, James Newton Howard, Stravinsky, Debussy, Rakmaninov, Holtz, and many more.

By the time he was 10 years old, he starts picking up bass lines from MOTOWN, Sting, Paul McCartney, EWF, Police, Eric Clapton, Jimmy Hendrix, Stevie Wonder, Michael Jackson, Prince, CHIC, Donald Fagen, Don Blackman, Steely Dan, Weather Report, Jaco Pastorius, Chick Corea, John MCLAughlin, Herbie Hancock, etc..

From 2002 to present, he has recorded, performed and collaborated with many artists and well rounded musicians such as:

John MCLAUGHLIN - Chick COREA - Bireli LAGRENE - Jean Luc PONTY - Dean BROWN - Gino VANELLI - Lee RITENOUR - Hiromi UEHARA - Mike STERN - Jim BEARD - Jada PINKETT SMITH - Marcu MILLER - Richard BONA - Matthew GARRISON- KAMASI WASHINGTON - THUNDERCAT - Billy COBHAM - Scott KINSEY - Otmaro RUIZ - Oz NOY- Dave WECKL- Dennis CHAMBERS- Simon PHILLIPS- Vinnie COLAIUTA- Andre CECCARELLI - Sylvain LUC - Jean- Marie ECAY- Paco SERY - Jean-Pierre COMO- Cheikh Tidiane SECK - and many more.

BOB FRANCESCHINI

<http://www.bobfranceschini.com/>

Saxophonist **Bob Franceschini** (*pronounced Fran-chess-ski-knee*) was born to a multicultural family and raised in NYC. Attended the **High School of Music and Art** and shortly thereafter began his musical career, touring, recording, writing, arranging and producing for the cream of the crop of Jazz, Latin Jazz, Pop, Salsa, Funk, R&B and World Music artists such as **George Benson, Eddie Palmieri, Woody Shaw, Kenny Kirkland, Chris Botti, Tower Of Power** (just song writing and arranging), **Randy Brecker, Chaka Khan, Michel Camilo, Willie Colon, Ruben Blades, Richard Bona, Jennifer Lopez, and Paul Simon**. His first heavy touring and recording experience was with **The Tom Browne Band** that also featured, **Marcus Miller, Omar Hakim** and **Bobby Broom**.

Bob has played sax and various woodwinds on many **TV** and **film scores** for directors **Sidney Lumet, Paul Schrader** and many more. He also played on countless **commercial jingles**. Franceschini has played on **over 200 CD's**.

Bob is well known from his work with guitarist **Mike Stern**. They are still touring the globe together. He has recorded on Stern's last **five Grammy nominated CD's** as well as **two critically acclaimed DVD's**

He been touring on and off for the last 8 years as the sub for **Bob Mintzer** with the legendary band **The Yellow Jackets** as well as subbing for **Eric Marienthal** with **Jeff Lorber Fusion**.

Bob has most recently been part of a trio with bassist **Victor Wooten** that also features drummer **Dennis Chambers**. Their CD **TRYPNOTYX** has been in the top ten in iTunes several times since it's release September 2017. They are currently touring the world in support of this recording.

Bob is known as an educator as well. He frequently does workshops and master classes the world over. He has many private students as well as students via Skype. For the last 7 years he has been an instructor of music theory, composition and improvisation at "**Victor Wooten's Center for Music and Nature**" (www.vixcamps.com) in Nashville Tennessee with students of all ages (8-68) from all over the world.

Most notably Bob co-leads and organizes a highly successful week long sax intensive at **Wooten Woods** called "**Inside :Outside Saxophone Retreat**" (www.insideoutsideretreat.com) , created with saxophonist/educator Bob Reynolds and saxophonist/naturalist Bob Hemenger. The camp has featured guest instructors, including **Joshua Redman, Chris Potter, Steve Wilson, Kirk Whalum, Branford Marsalis** and **Jeff Coffin**.

LENI STERN

<https://www.lenistern.com/>

Leni Stern was named one of the “50 Most Sensational Female Guitarists of All Time” in *Guitar Player* magazine’s 50th anniversary issue in 2017, with the publication aptly dubbing her “a genre-defying adventurer.” Leni’s example shines beyond just prowess on her instrument. The pursuit of her career across more than four decades has been in effect a political act – a practice in strength and defiance to be a woman and a bandleader, a female electric guitarist and a composer, an artist who produces her own albums and manages her own career. Moreover, given our recent political climate, it is now more essential than ever to celebrate the immigrant experience that brought Leni to the U.S. from Germany and her bandmates from Senegal and Argentina. Leni’s inspiration has long been the interconnectedness of music, history and our humanity. She says: “Music is one of the truest, most beautiful expressions of the human spirit, crossing borders, dissolving tribalism, binding us together – if we let it.”

Leni has been on an evolutionary road over the past decade and a half, as she fused her long-honed contemporary jazz sound with a deeply felt exploration of West African styles. She has traveled and studied extensively in Mali and Senegal, performing with the likes of iconic singer-songwriter Salif Keita and other African notables. The Munich-bred New Yorker’s trans-Atlantic journeys have yielded a fresh, personal idiom, one where progressive virtuosity blends seamlessly with age-old folk traditions. Leni’s trio with bassist Mamadou Ba and percussionist Eladji Alioune Faye – both natives of Senegal – released the albums *3* in 2018 and *Jelell* in 2013, along with figuring into the expansive cast of her *Dakar Suite* of 2016. Now the trio has become a quartet with the addition of Argentinian keyboardist Leo Genovese, a highly regarded talent on the New York scene as both a leader and as a collaborator with the likes of Esperanza Spalding and Jack DeJohnette. Leni’s first album with her quartet – released in summer 2020 and aptly titled *4*, for showcasing the new foursome – drew on the crystalline guitar, West African rhythms and multilingual songs that listeners know from her recent string of releases, with Genovese’s improvisational fire and hints of South American lyricism now integrated into the mix. The result earned *4* glowing reviews in both *DownBeat* and *JazzTimes*, among other publications.

The newest album from Leni is *Dance*, to be released in June 2021. A product of pandemic times, *Dance* was written and rehearsed in autumn 2020 and then recorded, under safe conditions, at Shelter Island Sound in December 2020, with Leni producing. For those in need of music to purge the pandemic blues, *Dance* fits the bill perfectly, brimming as it does with rhythmic joie de vivre and hum-along melody. The album sees Stern again fronting her cross-cultural New York quartet, featuring Genovese, Ba and Faye. One of Leni’s confreres from her days playing in Salif Keita’s band, Haruna Samake, also added his harp-like kamele n’goni to several tracks from afar and co-wrote one song with Leni, the buoyant “Kono” (“Bird”). *Dance* – Leni’s 23rd album since 1986 and surely her most irresistible to date – is another set of hook-heavy, multilingual songs colored with a blend of international rhythms and Leni’s jazzy, ever-melodious six-string sound. The release of *Dance* will be preceded by multiple singles, the first being the swaying, prayer-like “Yah Rakhman,” written by Leni and Faye. Other *Dance* highlights include the freshly arranged, richly harmonized traditional West African griot tune “Daouda Saane” and the hard-grooving, Genovese-penned “Kani” (“Spicy Pepper”), which includes some characteristically high-flying solos by the pianist.

About the new album, Leni says: “Well, first of all, the music we made is so bouncy – the rhythms just took over! You can’t keep still, playing or listening – that’s why I titled it Dance. But it felt special just to be in the studio. Simply getting together to make music is something to cherish, now more than ever – you can’t take anything for granted. Some of these conditions, though, I’m used to... I’ve worked a lot in Africa over the years, and health precautions were just a part of being there, taking care not to catch malaria or dengue fever. That’s part of the reality of life there. Trying to make the best of things during a lockdown has also been part of my experience. I made my album *Smoke, No Fire* in Mali during the military coup there in 2012, with curfews and all the anxiety. When the world around you is threatened, it creates a sense of urgency and focus. We made *Dance* like that, but trying to invoke a spirit of joy – and resilience.”

Dance follows close on the heels of the album 4, the summer 2020 release that showcases five compositions by Leni (including the beautiful, lullaby-like gem “Chartwell”), two by Genovese (“Japalema” being an LP highpoint) and one by Ba (“Habib,” which includes a guest solo by Leni’s husband, fusion guitar hero Mike Stern). Released digitally and on vinyl by Leni Stern Recordings, 4 was preceded by a clutch of singles from the record, including “Chartwell,” “Luanda” and “Amadeus.” *JazzTimes* enthused over the record, noting that “the groove is the thing.” And in its four-star review, *DownBeat* marveled over the “lyrical joy” of Leni’s playing, adding: “If you love the wail of Youssou N’Dour and the jangle of Franco Luambo, but also have a soft spot for música popular brasileira, this multilingual, crisply produced, infectiously melodic and rhythmically percolating album is for you.”

Produced by Leni in New York City, 4 features her not only on guitar but also on the n’goni, the “rhythm harp” of West Africa. “I often imitate the sound of the n’goni on my guitar, too – the guitar being such a chameleonic instrument,” Leni explains. “I’ve always been drawn to the sound of the n’goni, as well as to the kora, a similarly harp-like West African instrument. I love the warm, plucking quality to their untempered sound and the gently driving rhythm they can provide. Originally, it was the pentatonic melodies in West African music that I fell for – they called out to me. And they really stick in your ear.”

Having been raised in Germany, Leni grew up on Bach and Mozart, “so the harmonic structures of Western classical music are second nature to me,” she says. “With the music of 4, and now *Dance*, I wanted to incorporate more harmonic movement into my music again, to go along with its West African and South American rhythms. There’s even a bit of India in there, too. Inspired by John McLaughlin, I went to Mumbai in 2001 to study classical Indian vocal music and its science of ornamental melody, to help give my guitar playing a more liquid, vocal quality. Then, of course, there is the call-and-response from African music and American blues in our music. There are a lot of different sounds within our sound.”

Regarding the band’s rhythm section, Leni says: “Mamadou, Alioune and I have developed together an authentic African rhythmic feel, stark and highly syncopated. Mamadou and Alioune are like brothers in their common understanding of rhythm. Mamadou is also a specialist at evoking traditional West African instruments, like the n’goni, on the electric bass. Along with their deep roots in traditional music, the two of them played together in a rock band in Dakar. So, they also know how to write a chorus with a rock feel, with lyrics in the Wolof and Serer languages.” Enthused over the band’s newest member, Leni adds: “Leo Genovese reminds me of the artists I love most from South America: Astor Piazzolla, Hermeto Pascoal, Milton Nascimento. He never fails to put a smile on my face, as well as on the faces of Mamadou and Alioune. They always say, ‘Leo is so baaad!’

They have really bonded. Leo really is a fantastic keyboard player, whether he’s on the piano or a synth. He has classical-level chops but also this deep groove. I’m really excited about this quartet we have.”

Jazz and Song

Leni married Mike Stern in 1980, and their partnership has been a musically fruitful one, inspiring for both. “Of all the things I’ve learned from Mike,” she says, “the most important was how to integrate rock and blues with jazz in that soulful American style – as well as how to adapt the guitar to playing horn-like improvisation.” In the early ’80s, Leni and Mike helped stir up a vibrant scene at the Greenwich Village club 55 Bar. Her debut album as a leader, *Clairvoyant* (Passport, 1986), featured her alongside two jazz icons, guitarist Bill Frisell and drummer Paul Motian. “I first met Paul at the 55 Bar back in the ’80s,” she recalls. “The group I was playing with needed a drummer, and Paul was there, so he got behind the kit. I was pretty petrified to be playing with such a renowned musician – I had been listening to him on records since his days with Bill Evans, after all – but he was lovely. Unlike some guys back then, he liked playing music with a woman!” Leni had been a student of Frisell’s at the Berklee College of Music in Boston. “I really learned how to play jazz standards with Bill, using his style of thematic improvisation, which came out of Jim Hall and his melodic sensibility,” she explains. “To this day, I owe my sense of tone and legato phrasing to Bill and by extension Jim.” Fusion guitarist Hiram Bullock produced *Clairvoyant* and its follow-up from 1987, *The Next Day*. “Hiram taught me valuable lessons about how to work in the studio,” Leni says. “He was a mentor when it came to making records.”

After her two albums for Passport, Leni made a string of albums for the Enja and Lipstick labels: *Secrets* (1989), *Closer to the Light* (1990), *Ten Songs* (1992), *Like One* (1993) and *Words* (1995). Along with such collaborators as saxophonists David Sanborn and Bob Berg and drummer Dennis Chambers, the *Secrets*, *Closer to the Light* and *Ten Songs* records featured Wayne Krantz in the lineup on second guitar. Leni also recorded a guitar duo album co-billed with Krantz, *Separate Cages* (Alchemy, 1996). “Wayne and I were a perfect match – we complemented each other’s styles,” she says. “I’m a big-strokes person, while Wayne is a very detailed player. He’s an exceptional guitarist, and we had fun together during that period.”

With 1997’s *Black Guitar*, Leni began producing and releasing her own albums – and singing on them. “I was fusing my jazz influences with inspirations from the singer-songwriter world, trying to meld the two,” she explains. “Singing was a change for me, even though I had sung in the theater and in church as a young person in Germany. I started to explore songwriting at this point, and I encountered a community of singer-songwriters, which expanded my world and I began writing lyrics in English for the first time.” The *JazzTimes* review of *Black Guitar* liked the result, praising Leni for possessing “an ear for memorable, complex melodic hooks and keen insight to the human condition, as well as sublime guitar skills.”

Over the next decade, Leni further explored this jazz-meets-pop territory, releasing records via her own Leni Stern Recordings label, as she has done ever since. This period yielded the albums *Kindness of Strangers* (2000), *Finally, the Rain Has Come* (2002), *When Evening Falls* (2004) and *Love Comes Quietly* (2006). These records featured her original songs, as well as covers of hits by the likes of The Police and Joni Mitchell. She often enlisted high-end musicians in the studio, including Frisell, John McLaughlin and saxophone star Michael Brecker, as well as bassist James Genus and drummer Keith Carlock. *All Music Guide* encapsulated this sequence of records with its laudatory review of *Love Comes Quietly*: “Stern is an artist, pure and simple... *Love Comes Quietly* is a collection of poetic songs about tenderness. It is gentle, open and, therefore, vulnerable. These songs have energy, a roughhewn grace and, above all, they are emotion itself – there isn’t an insincere moment here. This would be a fine place to introduce yourself to a musician of uncommon caliber and vision.”

African Journey

Leni performed at Mali's Festival in the Desert in 2006, getting to know many of the native musicians on site in the Sahara Desert three hours outside Timbuktu. She began spending several months a year living and working in Mali and Senegal. These experiences led to a bold new era in her music, starting with the EP *Alu Maye* (Have You Heard) and album *Africa*, both released in 2007. *All Music Guide*, in its review of *Africa*, sets the stage: "Stern – a guitarist and singer whose artistic restlessness over two decades of recording has thankfully kept her output consistently fresh, unpredictable and invigorating – cut *Africa* at Salif Keita's studio in Bamako, Mali, using a large cast of local musicians and singers alongside Western players, adding overdubs of her husband, guitarist Mike Stern, and the late jazz saxophonist Michael Brecker. It's a stirring mix in which Leni Stern's crisp, bell-toned electric guitar runs and the sharp horns and melodious keyboards integrate fluidly with talking drum, n'goni and oud. Stern's impassioned vocals receive a dynamic boost from the battery of Malian vocalists giving voice to her words in their native language. With *Africa*, she has absorbed not only the sounds but also the feel of native African music."

Having undertaken this journey, Leni was "paying homage to the African roots of jazz, studying with real masters, getting to know the rhythms of the music, the languages and of life there," she says. "I studied the n'goni and the calabash drum – as well as various West African rhythms, learning what makes them different and special. I eventually recorded the biggest parts of six albums at Salif Keita's studio. Working there, it was easier to capture the sounds of instruments like the n'goni, the kora and various native drums in the right way. I also played in Salif's band, which was quite a learning experience. What a singer he is! The range of his voice, how he invests such emotion in his singing. It was a masterclass in phrasing, in rhythm. He is truly the 'Golden Voice of Africa,' so inspiring." She also played with star Senegalese singer-guitarist Baaba Maal, who brought her to perform at his Blues du Fleuve Festival. She learned from kora master Toumani Diabaté, too: "He taught me about the traditional rhythms of Malian music, as well as the rich orchestration you can achieve with a mix of string instruments and percussion."

Malian n'goni player Bassekou Kouyate and his wife, vocalist Ami Sacko, were also key mentors, as well as contributors to *Alu Maye* and *Africa*, among other Leni recordings. "Bassekou taught me how to play the n'goni – the original African blues instrument," Leni explains. "Ami is a griot. I accompanied her in songs for weddings and other ceremonies. The call-and-response that we know from the blues and gospel has its roots in traditional African music. It was fascinating that many of the songs that Ami taught me had a John Lee Hooker feel to them, both rhythmically and in the way that they recounted dramatic tales. One song, for instance, was the story of a man who was told by a seer that he was going to be rich, but that he mustn't take anyone as his wife. Well, of course he does, and then he is poisoned on his wedding night. That's just like an old blues song!" One of the most important instrumental lessons of Leni's experiences in Africa, she says, was "how to honor the rhythmic potential of the guitar, not just the legato quality that my jazz training usually emphasized. I wanted to be able to imitate the n'goni, the harp-like kora and the balafon – an African xylophone – on the guitar."

Leni's globe-trotting musical odyssey continued with the 2009 EP *Spirit in the Water*, which included songs formed by her travels in Mali, Senegal, Madagascar and India. The next year's album – *Sa Belle Belle Ba* ("Very, Very Big Snake," a title referencing ancient African religious ceremonies) – presented richly textured arrangements with electric guitar, bass and drums complemented by n'goni, kora, an assortment of West African percussion instruments and various Malian backing vocalists. Kouyate, Sacko and Diabaté all contributed performances, recorded in Mali. WNYC's Soundcheck program highlighted the record, saying: "Most musicians get to a comfortable age and stop pushing themselves into new directions. Not Leni Stern... On *Sa Belle Belle Ba*, there's a joie de vivre present

in her Mali-infused funk (or, perhaps, funk-infused Malian music). You can't help but imagine that she plays her guitar smiling."

After employing a huge cast of musicians for *Sa Belle Belle Ba*, Leni stripped back the instrumentation to essentials for her next album, 2011's *Sabani*, which was all written and recorded in Mali. "Sabani was mostly just me on guitar, n'goni and tiple, a 12-string acoustic Colombian instrument, plus Haruna Samake on n'goni and Mamadou Kone on calabash and talking drum," Leni explains. "I wanted to explore a more traditionally intimate, acoustic sound. We played together for two years prior to making the record and made a nice trio for the studio. Ami Sacko added some lovely vocals again, too." *All About Jazz* said this about the album: "Many musicians have ventured into Mali to tune into the legendary musical vibrations, but few if any have assimilated so far into the social fabric as Leni Stern. She has totally reinvented herself and her method of playing guitar to the point that it is a fresh creation. *Sabani* stands as evidence of an artist at the peak of musical evolution and revelation."

Leni recorded her next album – *Smoke, No Fire* (2012) – in Mali during a trying time for the country. "Sabani was a happy record made in happy times in Mali," she explains. "But much of the writing and recording for *Smoke, No Fire* was done while I was stuck in Bamako during a military coup d'état, in between curfews, waiting for the airport to reopen, and in the care of my wonderful Malian family of friends and musicians. The album speaks of my love for the country and the community I was welcomed into, despite all the difficulties." The review of *Smoke, No Fire* in *All About Jazz* noted that "there is definitely a harder edge in the delivery and significance of the vocals, with an aggressive leaning toward rap to underscore the message from the streets." Malian rapper Woroferela Moden guested on the record, while Leni sang in a mix of English and the Bambara language. Ami Sacko also collaborated on vocals, and young jazz star Esperanza Spalding added a bass track from New York.

It was for her album *Jellell*, released in 2013, that Leni first established her current trio with bassist Mamadou Ba and percussionist Alioune Faye, recording in Dakar, Senegal. The rhythms of the music evoke "my days hanging out at Youssou N'Dour's club in Dakar," she said. The album title is an expression in the Wolof language that means something like "Seize the moment" or "Go for it," which they did by digging deep into those Senegalese rhythms. Among the other contributors to the recording sessions were the Seng Seng Faye Percussion Ensemble, made up of Faye's five brothers playing the sabar drum. The *Financial Times* noted: "The last outing for Leni Stern's African trio saw the German-born guitarist in Mali wielding her n'goni in uncompromisingly gritty style. This time, she is in Dakar, and her guitar playing is looser and jazzier; at the same time, she is backed by the five brothers Faye on sabar drums, and they light an urgent, crackling fire under her and the rest of the band, whether the songs are about drought or wrestling." In its review, *Jazz Weekly* said: "Stern's use of guitar has a loose, earthy touch, making her one of the few Westerners who has mastered the dancing guitars that permeate sounds ranging from Mali to Malawi."

With her ambitious album *Dakar Suite* of 2016, Leni created an hour's worth of music recorded both in Dakar and New York, with orchestrated textures and one of the biggest casts of players she had assembled to date. *Dakar Suite* reflects, as *World Music Report* has said, "the venturesome spirit that seems to guide Leni on her every musical quest." The album's roster included the Mamadou Ba and Alioune Faye rhythm section, as well as the Seng Seng Faye group of percussionists and various top New York jazz players – including Gil Goldstein on accordion, James Genus on double-bass, George Brooks on saxophone and Leo Genovese on piano and Farfisa organ, plus various other instrumentalists and backing vocalists from Africa and the U.S. Leni dedicated *Dakar Suite* to the memory of Senegalese patriarch Vieux Seng Seng Faye, one of the country's great

drummers and teachers. The album yielded the sort of music that spurred the Los Angeles Times declare that “Leni’s geographic journey yields spiritual fruit.”

After the textural feats of Dakar Suite, Leni once again stripped things back with her 2018 album 3 – so titled for its focus on the sound of her trio with Mamadou Ba and Alioune Faye, although there was room for occasional touches by returning guests Genovese, Goldstein and Mike Stern. The album harks back to Leni’s earlier recordings in that the emphasis is on instrumental tracks, with six instrumentals and only two vocal songs on 3. It was also the first time in many years that Leni had recorded an album fully in New York. In an interview with New York City Jazz Record, she explained: “I’ve learned now, from all the great African engineers in the African studios I’ve recorded in, how to get that type of sound – and how that sound is produced. I’ve learned how to make that acoustic sound come out of the African drums and the n’goni.” All About Jazz praised the result, calling the album “bewitching” before concluding this way: “Over the years, Stern has successfully paid homage to our musical ancestors while integrating the complexities of African music with the sensibilities of jazz. 3 is a powerful embodiment and exploration of African roots that takes it to another level and creates a sound, style and statement that is uniquely her own.”

Worlds of Music

As Leni’s muse has led her around the world, her curiosity and empathy enabled her to develop collaborative relationships with kindred spirits across cultures. She appeared in a 2013 documentary film, Last Song Before the War, about Mali’s Festival in the Desert, where she first made the connections with the West African musicians who have had such a profound effect on her life and music. Having teamed with Salif Keita and his band on multiple occasions in Africa, the singer pulled her onstage Stateside to play a solo during his Celebrate Brooklyn! concert in 2008. Two years later, she performed at Carnegie Hall with her original African mentors: Bassekou Kouyate and Ami Sacko. As the Washington Post has said, “Stern doesn’t collaborate with the West Africans so much as commune with them.” Leni also played the U.S. Cultural Ambassador tour of Nicaragua in 2014, and she was artist-in-residence at Nepal’s Jazzmandu: The Kathmandu Jazz Festival in 2015. And, of course, she has played top jazz clubs across the U.S., as well as diverse festivals in Europe. Her live performances and ever-prolific recording career have earned Leni Gibson’s Female Jazz Guitarist of the Year award five times.

“All my travels and the wonderful people I’ve met and the beautiful music we’ve made together – it has all been a dream come true for me,” Leni says. “I love sharing the music with people, and I hope my records and the artists I collaborate with make listeners curious about the different sources of my music – so that they’re drawn to explore sounds from around the world. You can tell what a people is like from their songs and dances, just as you can from their food. These things make you feel closer to fellow human beings from across the globe, so that you sense the similarities you have with them rather than the differences. I think that’s more important than ever.”

— Bradley Bambarger