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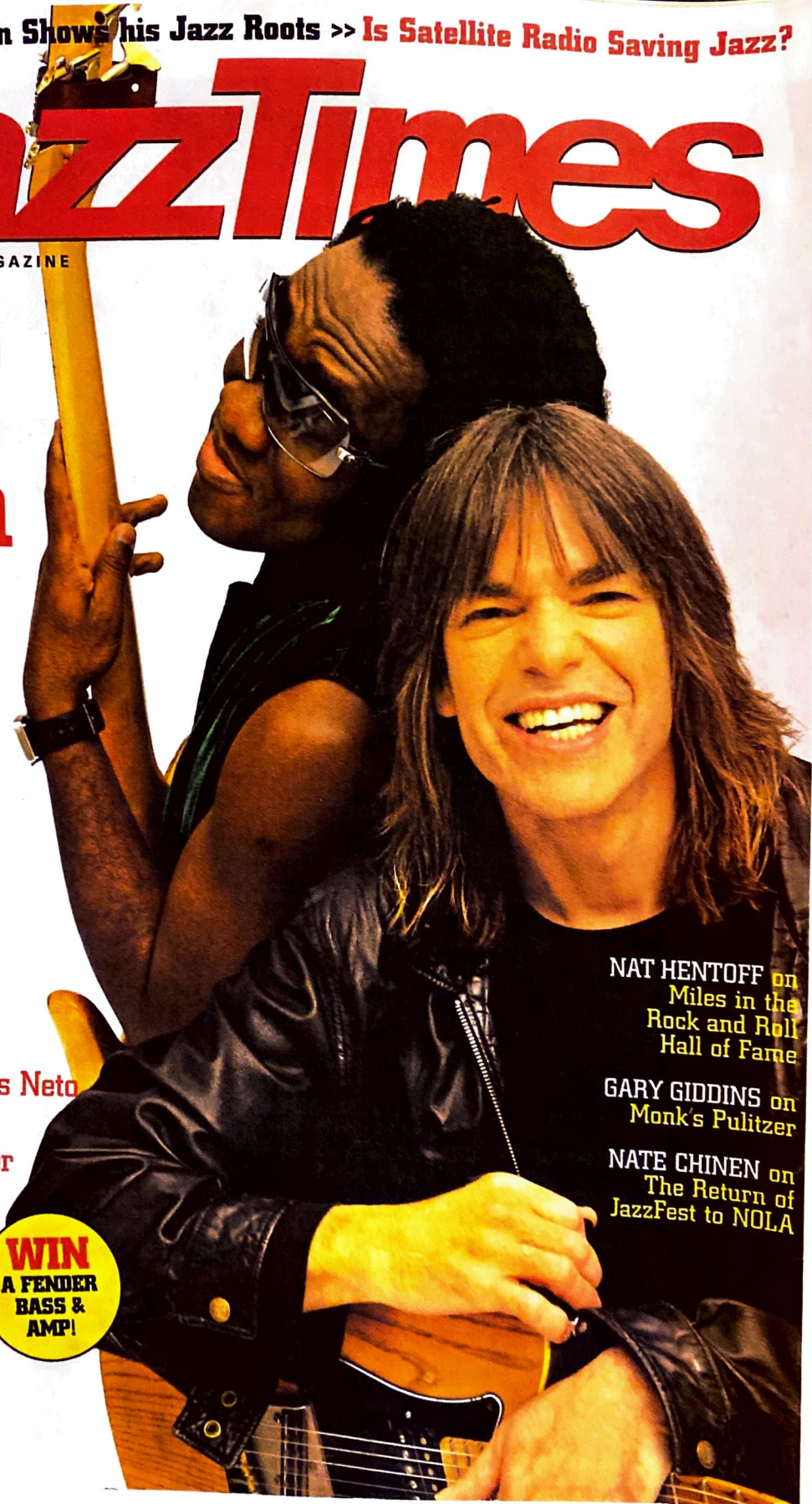
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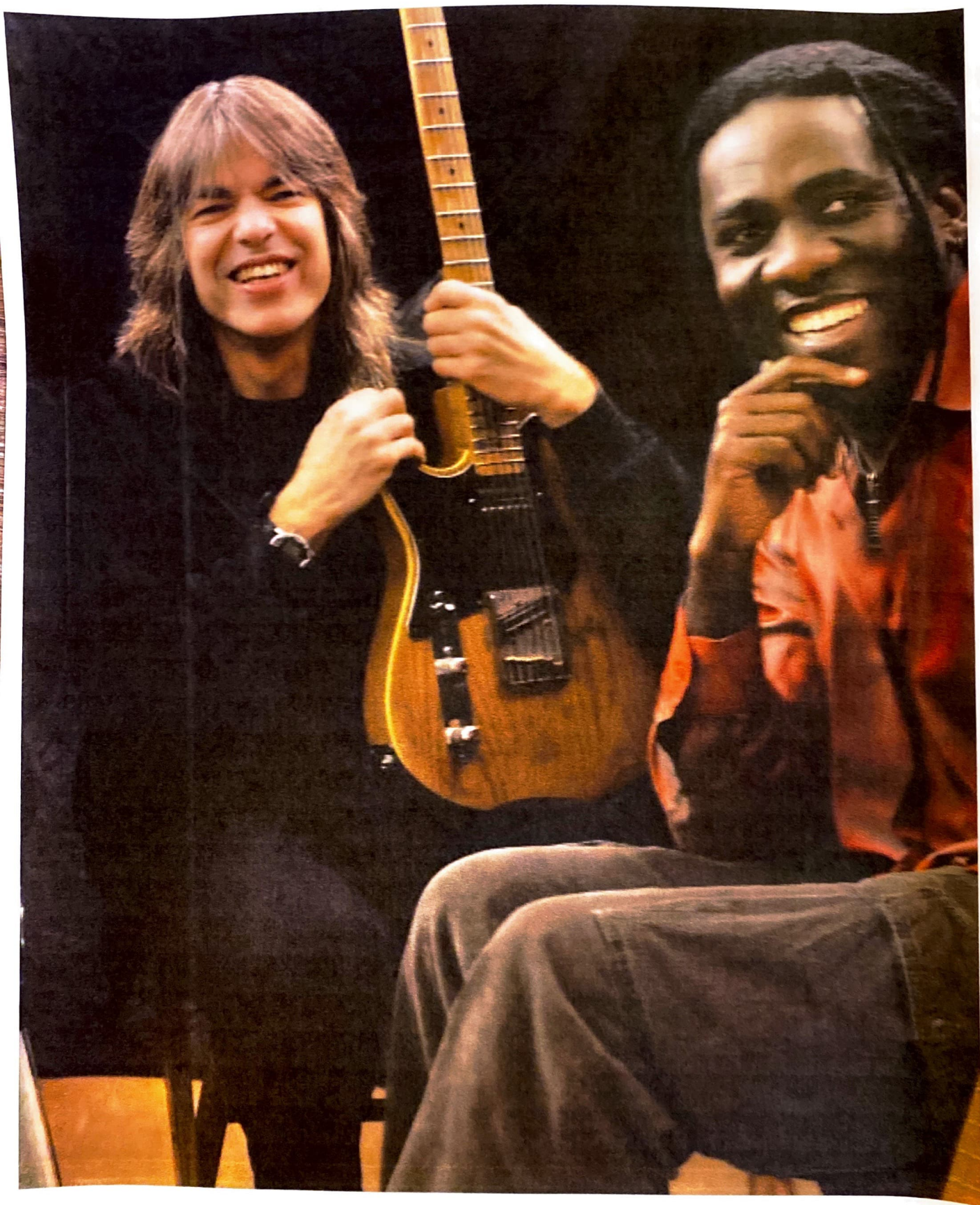
PLAYOFFS

MIKE STERN & RICHARD BONA CAN'T STOP JAMMING

Some 20 years ago, you could walk into the 55 Bar in Greenwich Village to find Mike Stern playing with the late, great Jaco Pastorius on bass. Not only is the little club still in business, in recent years its reputation as an incubator of new talent has soared. Stern, when he's in town, still rules the roost on Mondays and Wednesdays, honing original material and purveying his unmistakable brand of garage bebop. For the guitarist and former Miles Davis sideman, now 53, this has been a creative home for the past two decades: unglamorous but nurturing, stable despite ownership changes and continual aesthetic evolution.

By David R. Adler

PHOTOGRAPHS BY JOHN ABBOTT



Since Pastorius' untimely demise in 1987, Stern has had his pick of electric bassists (Jeff Andrews and Lincoln Goines prominent among them). But when Stern played the 55 Bar in early May, his partner was a powerful solo artist in his own right: Richard Bona. Originally from Cameroon, now based in Brooklyn, the 39-year-old Bona is appearing with Stern in a growing number of contexts. He's gained the most renown with an arresting series of major-label releases, starting with *Scenes From My Life* (Columbia) in 1999. His latest, *Tiki* (Decca/Universal), features Stern on the poppy track "Dipama."

Bona also has a prominent role on Stern's first effort for the Heads Up label, *Who Let the Cats Out?* The title, of course, gives a jazz-slang twist to the 2000 hit single by the Baha Men. But the album cover hints at a more literal meaning: There are four exotic cats roaming Stern's Manhattan apartment, which he also shares with his wife, the noted guitarist and singer-songwriter Leni Stern. One of their cats is named E'mala'neni, which means "Hello, how are you?" in Bona's native tongue, Douala (the language in which he usually sings).

Stern and Bona met in 1993 at the Red Sea Jazz Festival. "I'd heard about Richard from Michael Brecker," Stern recalls. "We went to my hotel room and played 'Autumn Leaves' for about four years. Richard was swinging his ass off. He showed me some African things on guitar—I still haven't figured that shit out to this day. Then he started singing one of my ballads, 'After You.'" It was Stern, in fact, who first urged Bona to move from Paris to New York. "Three years later, I was there," Bona says. "He'll never forgive me for it," Stern quips, prompting a round of laughter and high-fives.

There's no lack of warmth here. Bona likes to refer to Stern as "Mikey boo-boo."

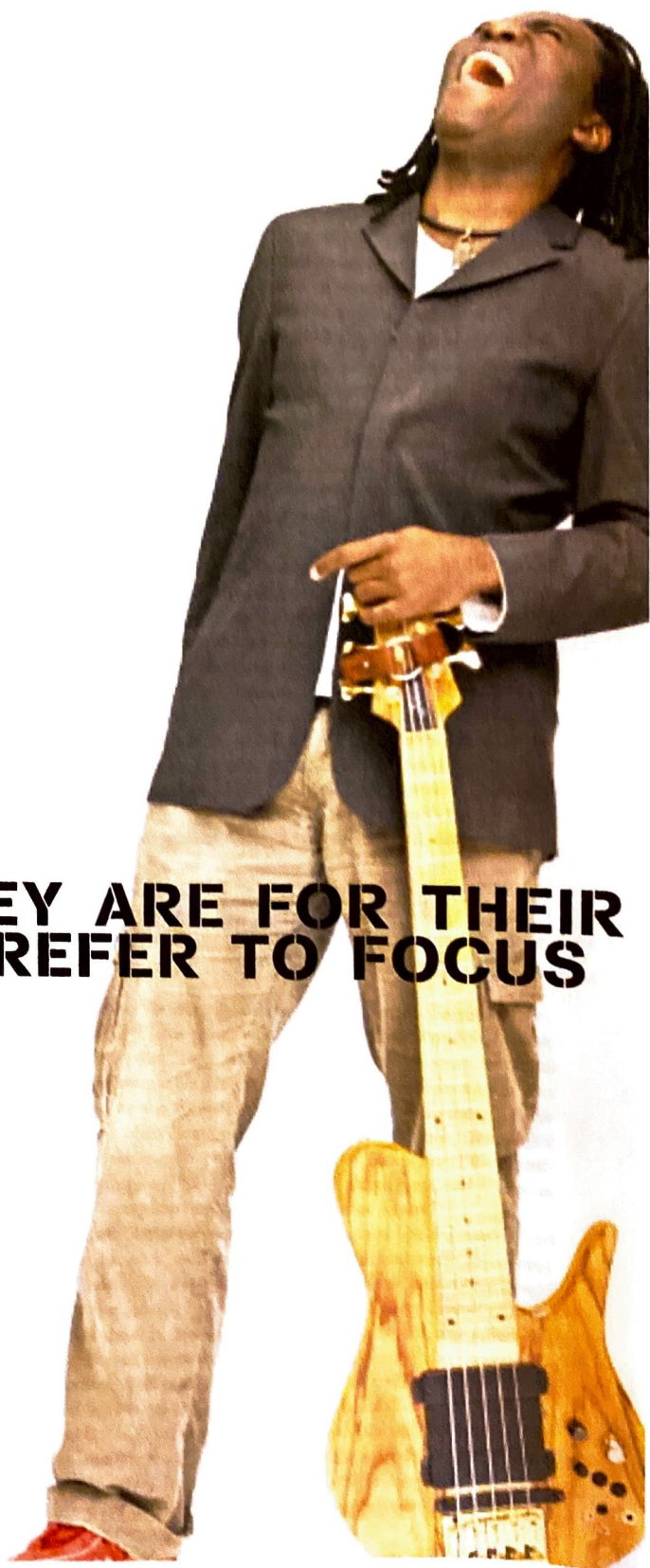
"I've watched Richard and Mike's relationship over the past few years with curiosity," says keyboardist Jim Beard, Stern's longtime collaborator. "In many ways they're quite different. Mike can sometimes be this determined musical force on a mission—sort of like a freight train—and Richard will respond as this dancing, free-spirited presence playing cat-and-mouse with everything. But Richard can be a freight train if he wants. And Mike has a free and playful side that he keeps close to his chest."

AS GRATEFUL AS THEY ARE FOR THEIR STERN AND BONA PREFER TO FOCUS

Like Stern, Bona started out as a rock 'n' roll guitarist. He took up the balafon (a wooden xylophone) in his native village at age six. But the instrument was out of fashion in the cosmopolitan city, where he moved with his family at age 11. So he decided to plug in and turn up. (To underline the point he starts singing the guitar solo from "Hotel California.") Immediately upon hearing Pastorius, however, Bona switched to bass. He was 15.

Since then he's toured and recorded with the likes of Harry Belafonte, Joe Zawinul and Pat Metheny. His own albums—tightly produced, accessible, song-oriented affairs—highlight his vocal and multi-instrumental abilities as much if not more than his bass playing. But armed with his five-string Fodera, Bona can be frightening. He nails Kazumi Watanabe's power-fusion on the recent DVD *Mo'Bop* (AbstractLogix), featuring Horacio "El Negro" Hernandez on drums. He's the consummate sideman in Stern's quartet, as documented on *New Morning: The Paris Concert* (Inakustik), a DVD filmed in November 2004 with tenor saxophonist Bob Franceschini and drummer Dennis Chambers. Stern and Bona also toured recently as members of Steps Ahead, and they're both featured on *The Word Is Out!* by the Jaco Pastorius Big Band—a follow-up to 2003's Peter Graves-led tribute project, *Word of Mouth Revisited* (both discs are on Heads Up).

At the 55 Bar, with Lionel Cordew on drums, Bona and Stern per-





formed with the same boyish enthusiasm they displayed during our interview. They began with "There Is No Greater Love" (which Stern played on the 2002 Chesky date *4 Generations of Miles* with fellow Davis alumni George Coleman, Ron Carter and Jimmy Cobb). They closed with an explosive "Straight, No Chaser," with Bona's percussionist, Samuel Torres, sitting in on cajon. But for the most part they focused on Stern's originals, including two vocal showcases for Bona, "Wishing Well" and "Still There." Both are from *Voices*, Stern's final album for Atlantic, but also his first to feature Bona. On the climactic outro of "Wishing Well," the bassist held one strong note in his trademark falsetto. As the note lingered, growing in volume, Stern was so moved that he broke into song as well.

Bona had a lot to do with Stern's decision to add vocal elements to his music, not just on *Voices* but also on *These Times* (ESC, 2003). Both albums find Bona sharing vocal duties with the remarkable Elisabeth Kontomanou, of Greek and African descent. On *Who Let the Cats Out?* Bona contributes his first-ever scat solo on record, on the rhythm changes romp "Good Question." ("Who let the cats out?" ponders Stern.) On "Language" and "All You Need," Bona's lilting falsetto lends the music intimacy and even a subtle exoticism. "The way Richard sings, it's often just syllables, but you hear it as a language," says Stern. "And in his syllables you hear where he comes from. People from the U.S. wouldn't use the same vowels and sounds."

Produced by Jim Beard, *Who Let the Cats Out?* is aptly named because it features a raft of top-shelf players: Beard on keys, Franceschini on tenor, Gregoire Maret on harmonica, Roy Hargrove on trumpet; Chris Minh Doky, Mc'Shell Ndegeocello, Victor Wooten, Anthony Jackson and Bona on bass; and Dave Weckl and Kim Thompson on drums. The young Thompson is now a fiery and versatile presence on many of Stern's live dates; she has also worked extensively with Kenny Barron's quintet. "She's a phenomenon," Stern says. "Her swing thing is what attracted me, but she's almost got an Idris Muhammad feel. She'll throw in second line—it just sounds Southern, you know? And she's getting better every day, which is fun as hell to watch."

The album's second track, "KT," is named for Thompson. On bass is Ndegeocello, who's been known to sit in with Stern at the 55 Bar. Here and in general, her debt to Marcus Miller, who performs with Stern on Miles

RELATIVE COMMERCIAL SUCCESS, ON MUSIC FOR ITS OWN SAKE,

Davis' 1981 classic *We Want Miles!*, couldn't be clearer. Gregoire Maret, another occasional 55 Bar guest, worked with Ndegeocello's Spirit Music Jamia on the 2005 disc *Dance of the Infidel*. His tender lyricism on Stern's "We're With You" recalls his recent work with the Pat Metheny Group. But Stern may well be the first to document Maret's unvarnished, Charlie Musselwhite-style blues chops, on the slinky slide-guitar track "Texas." Jim Beard described the recording process as similar to *These Times*: "We recorded 11 tracks in three-and-a-half days. Everyone played great, and it went as smooth as can be expected with this many different players."

Going back to Stern's earliest Atlantic dates, such as *Upside Downside* and *Time In Place*, his work has always balanced live dirt and studio sheen, even radio-friendliness. The more straight-ahead *Standards (and Other Songs)* (1992), featuring acoustic bassists Jay Anderson and Larry Grenadier, is the exception, not the rule. Stern's playing, live and on record, also reflects his unflagging commitment to the rock guitar idiom, although his bebop training can manifest itself at any given moment. That's what endeared him to Miles Davis. It's a talent Stern also put to use in Jaco's Word of Mouth sextet, Michael Brecker's touring quintet in the mid '80s and Bob Berg's co-led outfit a bit later (see the *New Morning* DVD for a bonus clip of Stern and Berg onstage in 1990). It's not unreasonable to call Stern a "fusion" guitarist, even if, like most musicians, he's wary of being pigeonholed. He appears

alongside Robben Ford, Steve Morse, Al Di Meola and others on Tone Center's recent all-star homage to Steely Dan, *The Royal Dan: A Tribute*. Incidentally, Stern is the only guitarist to appear on all of Tone Center's tribute projects to date, reinterpreting music by Coltrane, Miles and the Mahavishnu Orchestra.

"I had to practice and put a lot of work in to play jazz," Stern admits. "I was coming from blues and rock, and my brain was a little fried from back in the day." Bona can't resist interjecting: "Still fried!" Stern's drug-abusing days are long past, in fact, but they're richly documented in Bill Milkowski's *Jaco: The Extraordinary and Tragic Life of Jaco Pastorius* (Backbeat). Amazingly, Stern's habits were enough to alarm the notorious Chet Baker. "Chet and I used to play at 55 Grand," he recalls, referring to the storied jazz club and drug den, long defunct. "At one point Chet was trying to get sober. He told me, 'Man, you gotta watch out.' Even Miles tried to put me into rehab. So you know my shit was gone."

Today, Stern has one addiction only: "I'm a playaholic. I just want to play. Some people bitch and moan, 'Oh, man, 15 gigs in a row?' I say great!"

Bona shares that sentiment. "I hate days off," he insists. In late April, he crammed his sextet into the Zinc Bar for three nights, three sets per night. The group had just one day to recover from a jaunt to the Caribbean, South Africa and Ivory Coast. Mere blocks from the 55 Bar, the Zinc Bar is less roomy still. And Bona's group is one that could use some room: the leader has his

cabinets, Etienne Stadwijk a bank of keyboards, Samuel Torres congas and accessories, Ernesto Simpson a full drum kit, guitarist Greg Fine an amp and pedals. Somehow, alto/soprano saxophonist Aaron Heick finds a foothold near a microphone. The core of this band has remained stable for eight years or so, and Bona guides it with an almost cocky expertise. His bass playing is stunning and he knows this, but there's no hint of self-seriousness in his displays. Most impressively, the band's live mix is ideal. They're not too loud for the space; yet they hold nothing back. As they wrap the second set, Bona affects a bit of weariness: "Stick around; we've got 10 more sets to go. This is New York; it's 11 sets a night."

The repertoire spans Bona's discography to include items from *Reverence* (2001), *Munia* (*The Tale*) (2003) and the new album, *Tiki*. (Pastorius' "Liberty City" was another highlight.) Bona's music relies on virtuosity but is far less focused on blowing than Stern's, for example. The Zinc Bar billed his sound as "world jazz," but in some ways it's closer to the African pop of artists like Cheik Lô, Lulendo, Salif Keita and Lokua Kanza. In fact, the marvelous album *Toto Bona Lokua*, Bona's recent collaboration with the Congolese Kanza and the Caribbean-Parisian vocalist Gérard Toto, fits seamlessly with his own solo work.

Bona draws explicitly on Afro-Cuban and Brazilian music as well. Recorded in New York, Paris and Rio de Janeiro and self-produced by Bona, *Tiki* features guest appearances by Djavan, Toninho Horta and Osmany Paredes, among others. "Samaouma," arranged by Gil Goldstein,

features the classical strings of the Flux Quartet blending with the quartet of the Venezuelan Aquiles Báez. (Goldstein also co-composed "Mbanga Kumba," the final track from *Reverence*.) "When you're born in Africa you can make these connections right away," says Bona. "If you play Brazilian music in any village in Africa, they'll start dancing. Because it's basically the same story. And it's the same with Cuban music. Even the smell: In Brazil there was an old woman cooking just a simple tomato sauce, but it smelled exactly like when my grandmother cooked back home. That's where music comes from—the sound, the smell, our life."

Bona's gloss on the brief "Ida Bato (Ancient Song 1789)" left me fascinated: "I remember when I was eight years old, and my grandfather taught me a song that his own grandfather taught him. Sometimes all of a sudden I'll hear a sound and a whole song comes back to me. So I wanted to sing this song again. My grandfather was born in 1899, so I thought his grandfather might have learned it around the year 1789. When I listen to the same language today, I can see it already shifting. People who speak this language can't understand all the lyrics, because they're not using those words anymore."

Clearly, jazz is just one of the global influences informing *Tiki*, but it is present. Pianist George Colligan and drummer Ari Hoenig make an appearance on the charming waltz "Esoka Bulu (Night Whisper)." (Bona on Hoenig: "That's one brush-playing guy, man. He'll clean your whole house with those brush-

Giving a Heads Up on Africa

GROWING UP IN CAPE TOWN IN the 1940s, Abdullah Ibrahim absorbed the music of Duke Ellington and Louis Jordan alongside the hymns and spirituals of the African Methodist Episcopal Church, an institution brought to the city by African-American missionaries. Ibrahim and his musical peers felt that the ties binding the black worlds of North America and South Africa were so powerful that they shared a common musical language, though divided by thousands of miles.

"South Africans and African Americans are not really separate," he explained in an interview several years ago. "Duke Ellington was seen as a wise old man of our community. Monk's rhythmic approach sounded natural to our ears and was totally in the African tradition. And there's been a lot of intermarriage. So the interconnectedness is very deep and has

been going on for a long time."

Decades later, Dave Love, the president of the Heads Up label, discovered the enduring connections between the U.S. jazz scene and Cape Town when he accompanied Joe McBride to the 1999 Jazzathon Festival. It turned out that a track from the pianist's 1992 Heads Up debut, *Grace*, had been a South African hit, but the label hadn't realized it in the confusion of apartheid's waning years. Witnessing the Cape Town jazz fans' rapturous greeting of McBride, Love saw an opportunity to expand the African audience for Heads Up musicians while raising the profile of African artists outside the continent.

"I realized that there was a vibrant South African music scene and a lot of the fans were very familiar with Heads Up recordings," Love says. "It was a perfect opportunity for cross-cultural collaborations."

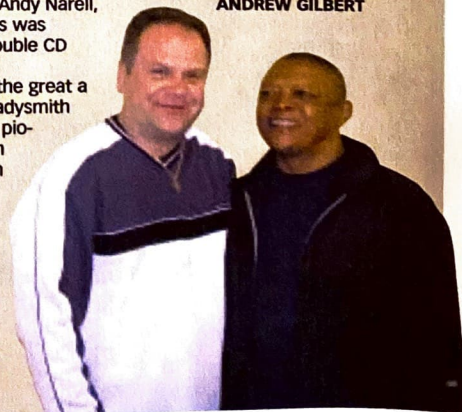
Starting in 2000 with *Smooth Africa*, the Heads Up Africa Series has showcased musical meetings between leading South African (and Zimbabwean) players such as guitarists Louis Mhlangu, Allou April, Errol Dyers, Jonathan Crossley and Jimmy Dlodlu, and Americans like McBride, Spyro Gyra and particularly Andy Narell, whose pop-star status was cemented with his double CD *Live in South Africa*.

With releases by the great a cappella ensemble Ladysmith Black Mambazo, and pioneering South African jazz performers Hugh Masekela and Marian Makeba, Heads Up has also highlighted the key role that music played in the struggle against apartheid. But nothing has pleased Love more than the way

the label has facilitated connections between South African musicians themselves.

"What was really exciting on South African front," Love says, "is that we put together collaborations with artists from Johannesburg and Cape Town who knew of each other but had never played together before."

ANDREW GILBERT



es.") Bona's love for Jaco Pastorius also surfaces, but in an unusual way. The track, another Gil Goldstein arrangement, is "Three Women," which Pastorius never recorded. There is, however, a lo-fi, two-minute piano rundown by Jaco himself tacked onto the end of *Live in New York City, Volume Five: Raça* (Big World)—a burning quartet session with Steve Slagle on sax, Adam Nussbaum on drums and none other than Mike Stern on guitar. Goldstein's new Half Note disc, *Under Russo's Moon*, includes a live version of the piece with Bona on bass. Goldstein also plays on bassist Carles Benavent's rendition from the hard-to-find 1997 recording *Fenix* (Nuevos Medios). Fathomlessly dark and haunting, "Three Women" underscores Jaco's prescience and completeness as a musician. Bona pours himself into the *Tiki* version, on bass as well as vocals.

As grateful as they are for their relative commercial success, Stern and Bona prefer to focus on music for its own sake. "At the end of the day, music is the winner," Bona declares, taking discriminate aim at the music industry. "Music is exactly what life should be. The perfect life. That's why musicians are the luckiest people on this planet. We tend to forget, hustling for gigs and all that. But think about it. You see a Russian cat on the subway and he may not even look at your eyes. But start playing a blues and you're brothers in two seconds. In real life, that would never happen."

Ian McEwan touched on this in his recent novel *Saturday*, in a passage that could describe Stern and Bona's rapport at its best: "There are these rare moments when musicians together touch something sweeter than they've ever found before in rehearsals or performance, beyond the merely collaborative or technically proficient, when their expression becomes as easy and graceful as friendship or love. This is when they give us a glimpse of what we might be, of our best selves, and of an impossible world in which you give everything you have to others, but lose nothing of yourself." **JT**

Listening Pleasures

Stern:

Jerry Bergonzi, *Wiggy*
McCoy Tyner, *The Real McCoy*
Jimi Hendrix, *Axis: Bold As Love*
Leni Stern, *Love Comes Quietly*
Miles Davis, *The Complete Live at the*

Plugged Nickel—"I've been transcribing Wayne [Shorter] on that record—I have no idea what he's doing."

Bona:

Wayne Shorter, *Speak No Evil*
Bill Evans, *Portrait in Jazz*
Mike Stern, *Upside Downside*
Joe Zawinul
Weather Report

"I got so much from Chet Baker, in my singing and playing. He plays like a perfect student, man, the logic. It makes so much sense." [He starts to sing a Baker-like solo.]

Gearbox

Stern:

Yamaha Pacifica signature model guitar
Fender strings, .10-.38 (.11 as high E)
Yamaha G-100 2x12 amplifier, "sometimes a Twin Reverb"
JBL 4x10 cabinet
Pearce top "that they don't make anymore. All the shit I like is gone."
Boss distortion and delay pedals
Yamaha SPX-90 multieffects: "I keep the harmonizer effect on zero for a fat chorus sound—it's more vocal, more like a horn."

Bona:

Fodera custom five-string bass
DR bass strings, 40-120
Walter Woods 1200-watt amplifier
Two Epifani speakers in stereo
Roland V-Bass System
Beyer 87 vocal microphone

Regina Carter

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