

Guitarist Mike Stern with Jazz and Strings

By OWEN McNALLY, Special To The Courant
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With an infusion of star power, The Jazz & Strings Series this weekend features the celebrated guitarist Mike Stern, a six-time Grammy nominee, in a concert paying homage to guitarist Wes Montgomery's 1963 album "Fusion!" — the iconic guitarist's first release with string section accompaniment.

"Fusion! A Tribute to Wes Montgomery," the HSO's latest hybrid jazz/classical salute to a renowned jazz-with-strings album, is presented Friday, Feb. 8, at 8 p.m. at the Theater of the Performing Arts at the Learning Corridor, 359 Washington St., Hartford.

Stern, the concert's symbolic stand-in for Montgomery (1923-1968), was born in Boston in 1953 and got his start with Blood, Sweat & Tears at 22. After playing briefly with Billy Cobham's fusion band, he surged to the forefront through his prominent role in Miles Davis' famous comeback band of 1981. Regarded as one of the top jazz-fusion and jazz guitarists of his generation, he's performed, recorded and toured worldwide through the years as a bandleader, sideman and guitarist/composer.

While best known as a prototypical powerhouse fusion guitarist with numerous noted fusion-oriented releases, his long, prolific career also features a wider stylistic net that has included standards and jazz classics.

Stern is accompanied by the HSO string ensemble and a jazz rhythm section featuring drummer Gene Bozzi, HSO principal timpanist and artistic director of "Jazz & Strings"; HSO bassist Edward "Rick" Rozie, a classical musician with international jazz credentials; and pianist Walter Gwardyak, a frequent arranger and pianist for HSO.

"As well as everything else he does, Mike is a great straight-ahead player," says Bozzi who cast Stern in the Montgomery role for the concert.

Bozzi first hooked up with Stern a few years ago while touring Russia with the German-born harmonica virtuoso Hendrik Meurkens. The two American musicians, who were playing in separate bands, ran into each other at concerts along the route, chatted on flights between gigs and stayed in contact after the tour.

The lineup for the HSO string section features: Lisa Rautenberg, Karin Fagerburg, Millie Piekos, Deborah Tyler, Michael Pollard, Candace M. Lammers, Mickey Reisman, Jaroslaw Lis, Martha Kayser and Cyrus Stevens, violin; Michael Wheeler and Sharon Dennison, viola; and Jeffrey Krieger, cello.