

Mike Merola

Mike Merola isn't just another technically skilled blues and jazz guitarist based in New York City, one voice among so many. What emerges most memorably from listening to his playing in his band The City Boys Allstars is its sense of intertwined emotional honesty and naturalness. No wonder some of the best singers and musicians in the big city choose to keep his company on gigs and in the recording studio.

Mike, born in the mid-1950s, introduced himself to the guitar at age 9. His first teacher was a Joe Pass fan named Frank Terris, who for five years honed Mike's keen ear for music. Rather than playing sports like many kids, he tirelessly practiced guitar and spent hour after hour listening to records by blues-based rock bands of the 1960s like Cream and the Yardbirds. Teenager Mike was specially drawn to the smooth vibrato and wailing sound of Cream's guitar god Eric Clapton. He also grew fond of jazz standards.

Joining his first band at 14, Mike played note-by-note covers of then-current rock material. This stifled his inclinations to improvise creatively, and he soon steered clear of these unimaginative bands. Guitar lessons from Ron Parker at Paul Simon's brother's music school in NYC, along with extensive practicing, increased his confidence about improvising and he worked with freewheeling R&B bands in the 1970s.

Significant to Mike's musical development, too, was his taking a History of Jazz course taught by Dr. Billy Taylor at C. W. Post College of Long Island University, where he majored in Communications and minored in Music Theory. For good reason, Mike was in awe of his teacher, known as "the world's foremost spokesman for jazz" because of his extraordinary educational efforts on behalf of jazz.

Mike says, "Billy became a friend and really opened my ears to a wealth of great music and to the many aspects of his journey discovering the music he loved, including all the many stories he told about his life, like living with and learning from Art Tatum for over a year." Mike was thrilled beyond words when Taylor gave him an A+ for a paper on stride-and-boogie-woogie piano genius Meade Lux Lewis. The guitarist enjoyed hearing the highly regarded Billy Taylor Trio in local performances.

After graduating from the City University of New York in 1976 (he had switched from Post following his freshman year), Mike moved to Los Angeles and worked as a sound engineer in television, while also playing in several genre-mixing bands, one of which came close to inking a deal with A&M Records. In 1980, he returned to New York City and found a job as a staff engineer at Channel 11 WPIX, where this award-winning employee has worked ever since. Mike's passion for jazz, blues and R&B was as strong as before, and he deepened his knowledge of the guitar by studying with the exceptional bebop guitarist Sal Salvador, widely known as the author of several guitar instruction books.

"Meeting Sal was a huge turning point for me," notes Mike. "I was in my late twenties. He was an excellent musician, a wonderful guitarist, who would explain complex aspects of [mastering the guitar] so you could really grasp them. His books, which I still use today, really improved my playing almost overnight."

Mike studied with Sal for two years. The lessons were so challenging that he almost gave up. But his instructor encouraged him to hang in there. "Sal would say, 'You could play holy hell out of the guitar and have a chance to be a really brilliant blues player.' This and many more comments pushed me to a level of playing I thought was unattainable."

Mike got so good Salvador started recommending him for sessions work. One job in particular was important to Mike. Saxophonist Jack Philpot was making a demo and he needed horns, so Jack and Mike met with the world-

class jazz trumpeter Lew Soloff, who treated them to a buffet at a Middle Eastern restaurant. Lew and Mike hit it off, and after hearing the guitarist play, Lew began introducing Mike to first-call musicians on the NYC jazz and pop scenes that were also involved with film and television soundtracks, late-night network television bands, and so much else. Mike's heavyweight new friends included saxophonists Fred Lipsius, Ron Cuber and Lou Marini; trombonists Jim Pugh and Tom Malone; and now-deceased trumpeter Alan Rubin.

Mike started up his r&b-jazz-rock band The City Boys Allstars in the early 1990s. The members included Lew, Lou, Jim, Tom, singer Bil Kurz, trumpeter Tony Kadleck, drummer Nick Saya, keyboardist Rob Clores and singer-bassist Billy Troiani, who would be replaced by Keith Lambeth. Then vocalist Frankie Paris came onboard. So did another talented singer, Angel Rissoff. Saxophonist Andy Snitzer, recommended to Mike by Jim, would sub for Lou when he had other commitments.

The Allstars' exciting performances were well-received by club audiences. The band recorded at two sessions between 1990 and '94; the best of these tracks can be heard on the recently issued album *Look Out, Here We Come*. The Allstars kept rolling along until calling it a day in 1996 when Mike needed to attend to his seriously ill mother. The deaths of his Allstars friends Frankie Paris and Keith Lambert a bit earlier were tough to take, as well.

Since 2011, the Allstars have been back in action again. Mike, in fine form as a guitarist and in good spirits, says, "It was only after a serious medical issue and surviving that did I decide to give it another chance. I formed my own indie label, released *Look Out, Here We Come* and then I set out to find another singer-writer and another bassist. I got Horace Scott II and Al MacDowell [long associated with Ornette Coleman]. Nick brought in percussionist Dan Sadowick, and I brought in Andy as a full-time band member. Tony acts as main producer and most of the arranging is done by him and Tom "Bones" Malone."

The current Allstars band has recorded a fresh studio album titled *When You Needed Me*, and the CD and Audio File Vinyl edition been well received since coming out a short while ago. And a new concert album, *Blinded by the Night*, recorded at Manhattan's Cutting Room club in August 2013, is coming out in March or April 2014. Also, a second studio album will be ready for release by July 4th. "This is the lineup I've always wanted," says Mike, whose impressive guitar work pays homage to his treasured teachers and influences like Eric Clapton, B. B. King and Joe Pass. "At the Cutting Room, there was magic all over as it was the best we have ever sounded. My dream has finally been realized."