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Tuesday, August 4th, 2009

## Blu-ray Reviews: Mike Stern and Stanley Jordan, "New Morning: The Paris Concert"

by Jeff Giles

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### Mike Stern – *New Morning: The Paris Concert* (2009, Inakustic)

[purchase from Amazon](#)

He's played with Miles and the Brecker Brothers, netted multiple Grammy nominations, and generally helped redefine jazz guitar for over 30 years, but Mike Stern has never reached the "name brand" level of fame enjoyed by other upper-echelon guitarists (see: Frisell, Bill), or sales consistent enough to keep him from making a pair of label changes in the last decade — but he *is* talented enough to inspire a worldwide following, and long overdue for a hi-def concert movie besides. The recently released *New Morning: The Paris Concert*, filmed last year at the Paris club whose name graces the title, takes advantage of both of these things, and if you're an HD-equipped jazz fan — or a music lover with a stomach for fusion that doesn't suck — you're in for a 105-minute treat.

If jazz makes you gag, let me try and put Stern's sound into perspective: In the fall of 1991, a year I spent mostly listening to Van Halen's *For Unlawful Carnal Knowledge*, Atlantic sent me a promo copy of Stern's *Odds or Evens*, and it kicked off a fascination with his music that has stayed with me to this day. This is not to say Mike Stern sounds like Eddie Van Halen — far from it — but as that album (and much of what has followed) proved, Stern is the rare jazz guitarist who is consistently able to walk the line between pure entertainment and sheer technique. He's got a signature tone that's stunningly pretty, and he isn't afraid to use it in the service of uncommonly melodic songs — but he's equally at home tracing skittery lines in the sand between skronk and lite FM. As an example, here's the opening cut from *Odds or Evens*:

Mike Stern, "Keys" [\(download\)](#)

*New Morning: The Paris Concert* captures Stern and his band (Bob Franceschini on sax, Tom Kennedy on bass, and Dave Weckl — who also supervised the sound mix — on drums) running through an eight-song cross section of songs from his catalog, including numbers both old ("Chromazone," from 1988's *Time in Place*) and new ("Tumble Home" and "KT," from 2008's painfully titled *Who Let the Cats Out?*). The band is tight, the video is crisp, albeit about as straightforward as you'd expect from a jazz club show, and the sound (represented in 5.1 DTS, 5.1 PCM, and Dolby Digital 2.0) is crystal clear. A pretty perfect show, in other words.

Here's the thing, though: *New Morning*, as with most other Blu-ray titles, costs around \$25, which is kind of a drag considering the set's complete lack of bonus material. What you see is literally what you get, which is fine, but I suspect the folks at Inakustic aren't doing themselves any favors by issuing such a bare-bones product for a premium price (especially considering the earlier release of a Stern DVD that apparently *did* contain extra content). Still, if you're a hardcore Stern fan who can't make it out to see him live, *New Morning* is the next best thing.

### The Stanley Jordan Trio – *New*



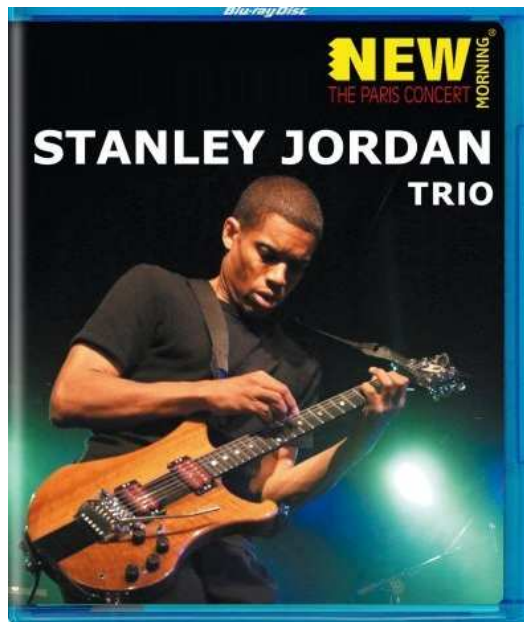
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**Morning: The Paris Concert (2009, Inakustic)**  
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Coincidentally, another of Inakustic's new Blu-ray releases comes from another jazz guitarist who helped tear me away from hair metal (and the Bee Gees' *High Civilization*) in 1991. Stanley Jordan, like Mike Stern, has been something of a well-kept secret in the jazz community; he's been making waves among critics and aficionados for over two decades, but aside from the odd breakout — I, for instance, first saw him play when he made a bizarre cameo in Blake Edwards' *Blind Date* — he's remained below the radar. Which is a tremendous shame, because Jordan is a scary talent. I mean, I've been talking up Mike Stern, and he's certainly gifted, but Stanley Jordan makes him look like a ten-thumbed hack. What makes him different, for the most part, is his use of the touch technique, which puts both hands on the fretboard and — if you're good enough at it, which Jordan surely is — frees you up to do dizzying stuff like play rhythm and lead on the same guitar, play guitar and piano at the same time, or play two guitars simultaneously.



The Cheap Pop  
 The Frontloader  
 The Heavy Edition  
 The Hits Just Keep on Comin'  
 The Lovely Mrs. Davis Tells You  
 What to Think  
 The Man in the Gray Flannel Suit  
 The Onion A.V. Club  
 The Screen Door  
 The Three R's  
 Theatre Is Easy  
 Theme Park Experience  
 Thinking About...  
 Trademark of Quality  
 Way Out Junk  
 Wings for Wheels  
 Worldchanging  
 You Must Be From Away  
 You Really Can't Make This Up

That probably sounds like a whole bunch of wanking, and to be fair, some of Jordan's stuff can border on the abstract. He certainly tends to be a far less melodic player than, say, Stern; he seems to be more interested in getting into the grooves of a song and working his way out with bursts of notes. He *can* focus on the forest — his lovely version of "Willow Weep for Me"  **(download)** is my favorite of the song's many covers — but he prefers to wander among the trees. Or climb them. Or plant new ones...you get the idea.

Jordan's *New Morning* Blu-ray is, if anything, better-filmed than Stern's; for whatever reason, the club wasn't as dark during Jordan's performance, and the camera work was a little more creative, allowing for the occasional beautifully framed (rather than simply serviceable) shot. And the band's performance lives up to it — Jordan spends a fair amount of time playing guitar and piano at the same time, and bass player Charnett Moffett — who starts sweating approximately 45 seconds into the first song and never stops — is an absolute monster, fingerpicking with blinding speed, sawing at his strings with a bow, and employing various effects to keep pace with Jordan. (Drummer David Haynes is also a fine musician, but he can't help but get lost in the spectacle — which actually speaks to his talent.)

Jordan starts off the set with a solo rendition of the Beatles' "Yesterday" before delving right into the heavy stuff, pulling out "A Place in Space," "Song for My Father," and "All Blues" (from 2008's *State of Nature*), then leading into an improvisational suite that takes cues from Bartok and Mozart movements. (Keeping with the improvisational theme, Moffett later takes "Amazing Grace" and turns it inside out.) If you care at all about musicianship, it's hard to take your eyes off Jordan — he looks like he's in some sort of musical fugue state, channeling the talents of two or three musicians at once. He held my three and a half-year-old daughter transfixed for a good half hour, and even my wife — who makes retching noises when she hears jazz — couldn't help an involuntary jawdrop.

Like Stern's *New Morning*, the Jordan Blu-ray sells for \$25, but it packs on a little bit of extra content in the form of "In Conversation with Stanley Jordan," a featurette in which Jordan discusses his artistic point of view and musical evolution. It's somewhat sleepy stuff, but Jordan has never been the most public artist, so it's nice to hear him talk about his art.

Bottom line? Both titles are worth purchasing, but if you've only got \$25 to spend and you need to pick one, go with Stanley Jordan's. You'll be entertained *and* amazed.

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*Rebecca* [6 days ago](#)

Thanks for the heads up. I probably wouldn't have known either of these were coming out otherwise. Very good summary of their playing, also. I saw Stern give a lecture/clinic in 1996 and he was a very nice, patient guy (one question was "Can you slow down some of your faster licks so we can really hear what's going on?" Really.) who is just showy enough to make you pay attention and good enough that you stick around.

Jordan has been a family favorite since his first album and I'm glad to see he's still doing his thing. His arrangements and song choices can be a bit maudlin at times, but what an amazing player with a very different approach to the guitar.

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Glad to be of service. I doubted many of our readers would be interested in these, but it's nice to know at least one person is a fan. Thanks for your comment!

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