

Mike Stern □ – These Times (2004)

Written by bluesever

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1 *Chatter* 6:10 2 *Silver Lining* 6:34 3 *I Know You* 5:06 4 *Mirage* 6:44 5 *If Only* 5:31 6 *Street Rhyme* 6:36 7 *Avenue B* 6:13 8 *Remember (For Bob Berg)* 6:02 9 *These Times* 8:12 10 *What You Believe* 6:45 11 *Last One Down* 5:30 Alto Saxophone – Kenny Garrett (tracks: 7, 9) Banjo – Béla Fleck (tracks: 3) Bass – Richard Bona (tracks: 2, 3, 5, 10), Victor Wooten (tracks: 8, 11), Will Lee (tracks: 1, 4, 6, 7, 8) Drums – Dennis Chambers (tracks: 8), Vinnie Colaiuta (tracks: 1 to 7, 9 to 11) Guitar – Jon Herington (tracks: 10), Mike Stern Percussion – Arto Tunçboyacıyan (tracks: 1, 4, 5, 6, 9), Don Alias (tracks: 8, 10), Richard Bona (tracks: 2, 10) Piano – Jim Beard Soprano Saxophone – Kenny Garrett (tracks: 1) Synthesizer – Jim Beard Tenor Saxophone – Bob Franceschini (tracks: 4, 8, 11), Bob Malach (tracks: 6) Vocals – Elisabeth Kontomanou (tracks: 1, 2, 4, 6), Richard Bona (tracks: 2, 3, 5, 10)

Combine the innovative guitar energy of legendary fusion master Mike Stern with old friends (bassist Richard Bona, drummer Vinnie Colaiuta) and new (saxman Kenny Garrett), and anything is bound to happen. But fans expecting raucous swinging and jamming the whole time may be surprised at the subtle lyricism and exotic explorations that define these times for their hero. Yes, his electric is crackling on the hypnotic opener, "Chatter," but it's in the crazy, exotic context of a Middle Eastern vibe inspired by Pakistani great Nusrat Fateh Ali Khan (look out, Eddie Vedder!). Jim Beard's jumpy piano, Colaiuta's wild, New Orleans groove, and Garrett's swirling lines provide great support. Once Stern and company have the listener's attention, they can become seductive with more intimate affairs like the Joe Zawinul-influenced "Silver Lining," which features an exotic falsetto vocal by Bona, a former Zawinul Syndicate member who also propels the tune with his increasingly muscular basslines. Bona adds the same touch in a gentler way to the lush romance of "I Know You," featuring a soft-spoken harmony line by guest star banjo great Béla Fleck. This sequence of tunes sets the tone of the rest of the disc, which mixes more Khan-flavored gems (the colorful singalong "Mirage," featuring vocals by Elisabeth Kontomanou), soft ballads, and a sexy midtempo funk number that (gasp!) might translate to the smooth jazz format. Another highlight is the punchy bebop number "Remember," dedicated to Stern's longtime collaborator the late Bob Berg. Perhaps the only drawback is having Garrett on hand but only featuring him on three numbers. ---Jonathan Widran, AllMusic Review

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