

## Mike Stevens

Writing and recording an album is never easy at the best of times. It's exponentially more difficult when you're suffering through a debilitating illness, as Mike Stevens was while bringing his new Stony Plain Records album, *Breathe In The World Breathe Out Music*, to life.

Stevens often had difficulty walking, experienced problems in all of his joints and developed cognitive issues before he was diagnosed with late-stage Lyme Disease and had to go on a serious antibiotic program for more than a year in an attempt to remedy his predicament. The award-winning composer and harmonica player often couldn't hold his instrument and was worried that he'd never be able to record again.

That could have been earth-shattering for Stevens, of whom legendary Grand Ole Opry star Roy Acuff once said: "I've never heard anyone play the harmonica like you play the harmonica."

It was in this environment that Stevens decided to make *Breathe In The World Breathe Out Music*.

"What happened in a really strange way is that I played completely differently than I have on any other record because I didn't have much memory," says Stevens.

"I was just reacting to what was there in the moment. It wasn't about muscle memory of anything or licks or things I'd thought about or lines or anything. It was strictly reactionary."

The process was slow, as Stevens could often only work for an hour or two a day, and doing all of this while the rest of the world was dealing with COVID-19 and its restrictions added to the complexity of the situation. Luckily, he was able to record with talented musicians he was friends with — many of them from around his hometown of Sarnia, Ont. who offered patience and provided an important support network.

“It made it really easy to record,” says Stevens. “There was no pressure.”

Stevens’ unique vocal harmonica technique features prominently on all 12 of the 53-minute album’s songs. And though he’s never felt totally comfortable singing, he provided lead vocals on four tracks.

Stevens was joined by acoustic guitarist Jeff Getty, electric guitarist Kevin Breit, drummer Art Hratchian and bassist Jeff bird on most of the tracks, with acoustic guitarist Jesse Wells, mandolin player Andrew Collins, and vocalists Cory James Mitchell and Polly Harris also contributing.

“I picked musicians and friends that I knew could groove really hard and just respond in the moment and not over-think anything,” said Stevens.

*Breathe In The World Breathe Out Music* was recorded using a lot of Stevens’ gear and microphones at The Grove Productions, located just outside of Sarnia in Camlachie, by engineer Mike McKyes. It was mixed at The Cottage in Guelph, Ont. by Scott Merritt.

The album features seven original songs written by Stevens, opening with “Like A Little Bird,” a gently rolling song featuring airy vocals from Harris with a choir backing her up.

Stevens and his wife Jane were caregivers for his mother, and he’d purchased a budgie for companionship for her after his father passed away. Once, while his mother was asleep on the couch while she was very ill, he saw the bird sitting on her hands for hours and took a photo.

“It’s just the idea that even when things were at their very darkest, there’s a light in there,” says Stevens.

“Watermelon Pie” — a shuffling instrumental driven by harmonica, guitar and drums — was the first fiddle tune that Stevens wrote when he was playing bluegrass music in the early 1980s.

“Livin’ In Sarnia,” a co-write with New Brunswick blues artist Matt Andersen, is based around Stevens saying “I’m livin’ in Sarnia and I’m livin’ there still, if the air don’t get me, then the French fries will” into his harmonica while blowing out and breathing in. The lyrics are based on two Sarnia signatures: its reputation as a petrochemical hub; and a chip truck named Albert’s Rolling Lunch that was a local favourite.

There’s a video for “Livin’ In Sarnia” that was shot by music photographer Richard Beland when COVID-19 was at its height and involved about 100 people, including cameos from these people with connections to the southwestern Ontario city across the St. Clair River from Port Huron, Mich.: astronaut Chris Hadfield; singer-songwriter Donovan Woods; author, venture capitalist and

*Dragons' Den* panelist David Chilton and his longtime partner, cookbook author Greta Podleski; and comedian John Wing Jr.

The bluesy “Bad In A Good Way” deals with the trappings of fame and bloated egos and Stevens delivers the lyrics in a way that are spoken as much as sung.

“Jesse’s Request” is a slower instrumental that has an almost tango-like element to it. It was originally written and recorded many years ago in Nashville when Stevens was touring the world with American bluegrass brother duo Jim & Jesse. Jesse McReynolds liked the tune so much that he requested that Stevens play it at his funeral, which hopefully he won’t have to do for the 92-year-old mandolin player and Grand Ole Opry member for quite a while yet.

“Devil’s Bride” showcases Stevens’ gruff voice with a sung-spoke delivery. It was originally recorded in a duo format with Andersen for the 2009 album, *PiggyBack*, but this time it’s fleshed out with a rhythm section.

The album ends with “Put Your Phone Down.” The first half of the somewhat experimental, tension-filled number is instrumental before the appearance of spoken-word lyrics decrying people always being on their cellphones and taking photos as part of their obsession with social media popularity.

*Breathe In The World Breathe Out Music* also includes five covers, which Stevens imprinted with a bluegrass influence.

“I wanted to do them in a way that was unusual and powerful and a little off-kilter,” says Stevens.

The interpretations include “Orange Blossom Special,” which Stevens has played at The Grand Ole Opry in Nashville, Tenn. numerous times over the years.

And while the story told by the lyrics were such an important part of Gordon Lightfoot’s “The Wreck of The Edmund Fitzgerald,” Stevens has successfully made an instrumental version of the Canadian classic.

“You can hear the wind blowing and you can imagine how cold it can be standing by the lake in November in a big storm,” says Stevens. “It's got that in it.”

The album also features Stevens’ instrumental arrangements of traditional songs “Grumbling Old Man, Grumbling Old Woman” and “Amazing Grace.” He sings on his arrangement of another traditional song titled “Ida Red.”

Stevens has made his name musically as both a solo artist and a sideman. While he enjoys both, he appreciates the freedom of what he can do on his own.

“When I'm a solo artist, I get to follow exactly the ideas that I have and I can just go in exactly the direction I want to go,” says Stevens. “When I'm collaborating, I'm always super careful not to step on anybody else's ideas.”

Since touring and live performances have largely been shut down due to the pandemic over the past two-plus years, Stevens is looking forward to getting on the road to support *Breathe In The World Breathe Out Music*.

Playing harmonica has enabled Stevens to travel around the world, perform on the Grand Ole Opry stage more than 300 times, and have a wide variety of interesting experiences for more than 35 years. And while few play it as well as he does, he understands why people relate to the instrument.

“It's incredibly easy for anyone to pick up and make a sound on. You can play how you feel with it, but it's probably one of the hardest instruments there is to play seriously because it wasn't built for it.

“It's this really odd combination. It's a really human instrument because your body is the instrument. You're not plucking a string on a piece of wood. Your body's creating the tone in your mouth, so it's a lot like a voice.”

Stevens has been able to put more than 40,000 harmonicas, fiddles, keyboards, ukuleles and guitars in the hands of more than 10,000 Indigenous young people across Canada and Alaska through ArtsCan Circle, a registered charity Stevens founded in 2002. It also involves holding workshops consisting of virtual arts, filming, recording, creative writing, drama, poetry, harmonica, keyboard, guitar, beatboxing, beading, inspirational talks and performances.

“We collaborate with Indigenous communities across the north and rotate musicians and artists through those communities and set up libraries of donated musical instruments,” says Stevens. “We set up recording studios and try to clear a path so that Indigenous youth can have a louder voice through music and the arts.”

If all of that wasn't enough, Stevens has also been active as an educator, author and frequent keynote speaker. He's recently contributed music and performed shows with multimedia shows with photographer Larry Towell and he played on Kevin Breit's new album.

Stevens also continues to write music and has catalogued hundreds of songs or partial songs for future use.

“I'm always staying busy,” says Stevens. “There are always things to do.”