

Recapturing the Current

**JOHN MCLAUGHLIN
PLUGS IN AND
CRANKS UP THE
VOLUME FOR A
RETURN TO
FUSION**

**By Josef Woodard
Photos By Clayton Call**

Perhaps more than any other member of the elite echelon of jazz legends, John McLaughlin has grappled with the subject of electricity. By now, nearly 40 years into his status as one of a handful of living guitar greats, McLaughlin has reached the point where his regularly oscillating instrumental choices have become an operative part of his artistic persona.

Pragmatically and philosophically, McLaughlin has fallen in and out of love with the electric guitar, going back to his earliest years as a budding guitar hero. In the late '60s, Tony Williams hired the young British firebrand on the advice of Jack DeJohnette. McLaughlin quickly grabbed attention for his new brand of intensity, informed by jazz, rock and blues, with touches of Indian music and flamenco. Even so, as McLaughlin launched his own electric pioneering fusion band Mahavishnu Orchestra, he recorded the classic 1970 acoustic album *My Goal's Beyond*, including his dreamy version of Bill Evans' "Blue In Green." Paradox is a natural part of the ongoing McLaughlin saga.



Cut to today, and the now 65-year-old McLaughlin's electricity fixation continues. Of late, McLaughlin has been back in the world of upper-end dynamics and the intensity of his post-fusion style, after most of this decade spent in the more peaceable kingdom of his Indo-jazz group Shakti.

McLaughlin's 2006 album, *Industrial Zen*, was a powerhouse return to the electric jazz-rock genre after years away. His U.S. tour last fall with the group he calls the 4th Dimension marked, for some of his fusion fans, a long-awaited return to the realm of the loud and fast. Drummer Mark Mondesir propelled the group, with some help from keyboardist Gary Husband. Wizardly young French bassist Hadrien Feraud frequently seized the spotlight with his madly nimble technical facility, even if he has yet to settle into his playing on a musical level.

"I'm a jazz musician by discipline," McLaughlin said, "but I'm not the average cool standards player. Don't misunderstand me. In fact, that's part of who I am. Listen to the four standards on the *Thieves And Poets* album (2003). I went back into the *Time Remembered* mode."

McLaughlin referred to the 1993 album he made with the all-acoustic guitar Aighetta Quartet, *Time Remembered: John McLaughlin Plays Bill Evans*. Releasing an Evans tribute surprised some who typecast McLaughlin as a fusioner. But his love for Evans runs deep, and the influence can be heard in the harmonic probity and lyricism of McLaughlin's ballads.

"Those standards have been in my heart and mind for most of my life," said McLaughlin, speaking to the lure of the *Real Book*. "These are the pieces I heard in the '50s, the Broadway standards. So that side of it I like. But I grew up with r&b and rock 'n' roll, as well as jazz. I've been that way from before Mahavishnu. It was that way with Lifetime, which was wild.

"It's still Johnny McLaughlin, electric guitarist. It's under my skin, the electric guitar."

Amid his American tour, McLaughlin sat down for a breakfast interview in a hotel in Santa Barbara, Calif., after having played to a rapt audience in the intimate Lobero Theatre in town the night before. McLaughlin is a morning person, unlike the musician archetype. "I know," he said, "I'm not a typical musician."

One way he's atypical relates to a fierce commitment to heeding his muse, despite what the market or outside observers have to say about his work. "A long time ago," he said, "I forgot about making records for making people happy. I hope they make people happy. I'm basically like a painter. I get this compulsion to do this or that and so I do it. Don't forget: I'm extremely fortunate to have had the privilege to do that in music, because not everybody has that choice or the opportunity. But a painting is



a painting. That's the state of things at this moment in time.

"You know that you're not able to please everybody all the time," he continued. "You just hope that some people will enjoy it."

Having refused to settle into one mode or band for long, McLaughlin has been and remains a restless guitar hero. He is also a controversial figure in jazz circles, where fusion is anathema, an f-word more unfashionable than even in its '70s heyday. In Ben Ratliff's New York Times review of the 4th Dimension's Town Hall concert last September, the critic bemoaned the dizzying muchness of it all: "The rapid notes became a never-ending fizz, relieved occasionally by a ballad or a blues." He summed it up by writing that "there weren't enough strong melodies in the music to offset the extravagant technique."

McLaughlin's reputed extravagant technique has long been a point of misunderstanding for detractors, partly because of his position inside and outside of jazz. His flurrying phrases are about more than speed or fretboard machismo, instead taking cues from the improvisational language of Indian music, with its intricate rhythmic subdivision and ecstatic overtures. His density factor also relates more to John Coltrane's sheets-of-sound idea than any rock 'n' roll-affiliated model. His sense of swing and standards playing is more raw-edged than most mainstream players, although he leaned into the jazz mode through his work with organist Joey

DeFrancesco in the '90s.

Industrial Zen (Verve) represented a new, 21st-century step into the fusion world, but also made nostalgic references to musicians and world figures important to McLaughlin's life: "For Jaco," "Wayne's Way"—dedicated to Jaco Pastorius and Wayne Shorter, respectively—"To Bop Or Not To Be" (for Michael Brecker), "Dear Dalai Lama" and "Señor CS," for guitar/spiritual comrade Carlos Santana.

After that album came out, McLaughlin left the major label world for smaller independent labels such as AbstractLogix and his own Mediastarz. Recently, McLaughlin has released an educational DVD on the South Indian system of Konokol, made in collaboration with former Shakti member S. Ganesh Vinayakram. Also in the hopper is another album in the "jazz rock" vein, with "young lions of Indian music" including slide guitarist Debashish Bhattacharya, electric sitarist Niladri Kumar, vocalist Shankar Mahadevan and electric mandolinist Rajesh Srinivas. This Indo-fusion project came as a surprise musical progeny during a six-month sojourn to India McLaughlin made with his family.

Although his muse had other plans for him, McLaughlin said, "I didn't go for work. We went because we thought it would be good for us to do it, and also for our boy Luke."

For the past 25 years, McLaughlin has called Monte Carlo, Monaco, home, a radical departure from time spent in New York and not your

typical jazz legend haven. He has raised his family in the idyllic climes of the Mediterranean, a happy point of departure and return. "Don't get me wrong," he said, "I lived in New York for 14 years and I loved it. But from a family point-of-view, it's different. I was a single guy then. With kids, if you can get near the water, some mountains or some greenery, it's important."

Even as the "retirement age" McLaughlin makes his way forward with new projects, his past keeps bubbling up beneath him. Within the last year, several releases have materialized from his vast archives. His feisty guitar work supplies an important, signature voice on the new Miles Davis reissue *The Complete On The Corner Sessions* (Columbia/Legacy), and McLaughlin himself was behind a release of live and studio recordings from 1979 by the brief-lived Trio Of Doom with Pastorius and Williams (also on Legacy). "It's too bad we couldn't keep that group together more than one date," McLaughlin laughed ruefully. "We were a little short on material there. But it was Jaco and Tony. I'm the only one left."

Thinking back, McLaughlin remembered that "the first guy Jaco came to see when he drove to New York was me. He saw me at SIR rehearsal studio. He immediately relieved me of \$20 to repair a scratch that he had on his car, which I never got back. (laughs) Jaco was something else.

"Jaco came and said, 'I want to gig with you,'" he continued. "I said, 'I've got a great bass player already, but let's jam.' We jammed and it was amazing. I called Tony immediately and said, 'I don't know if you need a bass player, but you gotta hear this guy.' They started to do some things together, but the next thing I

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knew, he was with Weather Report and the rest is history."

Another intriguing new flowering from McLaughlin's archival garden is a live two-DVD video from performances at the Montreux Jazz Festival, released by Eagle Eye Media: one dates from the 1974 Mahavishnu Orchestra, an expanded and expansive band that included Jean-Luc Ponty and drummer Michael Walden; the other features the leaner, more urbane 1984 band with saxophonist Bill Evans, keyboardist Mitch Forman, bassist Jonas Hellborg and drummer Danny Gottlieb.

McLaughlin spent some time last year venturing down memory lane to prepare the DVD project. "The only thing we had to work with was this old stereo analog tape that had some glitches in it," he said. "It had been lying around

for too many years. But it's a document. The 1984 band was really good, and the '74 *Visions Of The Emerald Beyond* record was one of my favorites."

Also, Columbia/Legacy has issued a two-CD, multidecade-spanning compilation, *The Essential John McLaughlin*. Asked about the whirlwind, career-compacting Legacy compilation, McLaughlin was only half-joking when he said, "My work could probably be boiled down to an essential two minutes. When I think of the fact that the entire work of Anton Webern—one of my all time favorite 20th century composers—can be put on two CDs, I'm even happy that people care to give my work an 'overview' at all."

Any overview of McLaughlin's persona traces back to his days as Johnny McLaughlin, an uncommonly virtuosic guitarist who found himself in the thick of the London blues and rock scene in the '60s who also followed his heart into jazz, flamenco and Indian music. During the '60s, McLaughlin played with Graham Bond, Ginger Baker and Alexis Korner—who he calls the "godfather" of the British blues scene that spawned the Rolling Stones and Cream. Simultaneously, though, he played jazz and put in a stint as a "studio shark" before growing tired of it and moving to Belgium. Here, he became a happy jazz pauper again. Then came the call from Williams and a new life began.

Who were some of McLaughlin's early heroes from the rock world? "Eric [Clapton], until today," he said. "Jeff [Beck] is up there, and Jimi [Hendrix], of course, in the old days. But I also used to like Leslie West from Mountain and Neal Schon, the guitar player for Santana, who did all the lead guitar work in the early days. He had the sound."

Like Beck, McLaughlin has been mastering the art of using a tremolo bar in a painterly, nuanced way. It started around the time of his 1990 album with DeFrancesco, *Spirits*. "I had this big acoustic-electric Gibson and I put a Bixby tremolo bar on it, because on the guitar it's easy to bend the string up," he said. "But it's nice to also bend the string down sometimes. For that, you've got to have the tremolo bar.

"This comes from Miles, too," he continued. "He would bend notes down, don't forget. I first heard him when I was 15 years old—50 years ago. So I've been listening to this guy for 50 years, bending notes down, and it rubbed off."

Just before McLaughlin and bassist Dave Holland made the fateful transatlantic journey in the late '60s, soon to be inducted into international fame through Davis' prism, they had been musical allies in England. Holland was in McLaughlin's band, but left before the guitarist recorded his debut album, *Extrapolation*. The musicians had been experimenting with odd meters, among other common interests. "I

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ests. "I remember John coming to my house and bringing some of his tunes, which dealt in another way of working with meter," Holland said. "We played through a lot of that stuff. But it was all in the air. John Surman was another musician who was writing in different meters."

Guitarist John Scofield found himself in the unusual role of playing a semi-surrogate McLaughlin recently in Trio Beyond with DeJohnette and organist Larry Goldings. The band began as a one-off tribute concert to Williams' Lifetime, but has continued, fueled by the interest of the public and musicians alike.

Scofield was fascinated by the new sound McLaughlin brought to the jazz scene upon his arrival in the States. "When Tony Williams Lifetime played," Scofield said, "I heard him a bunch in New York, at the tiny club Slug's and at a couple of concerts. This was in '69 and '70, when I was just starting to get into jazz. I was in awe of McLaughlin's playing.

"McLaughlin came onto the scene, with a whole world of music that he brought to his stuff," he continued. "He had a European outlook. Free-jazz had been blossoming and he was a part of the English free-jazz scene, and also Indian music. You can hear that right from the beginning. Also, there are his roots as a blues man and a jazz player. All those elements came together."

After becoming a proto-fusion sensation with his fiery Mahavishnu Orchestra, with its classic early-'70s albums *Inner Mounting Flame* and *Birds Of Fire*, McLaughlin's first major escape from the electric muse came in the mid-'70s. At the time, he was tiring of the Mahavishnu adventure, then in its expanded form with Ponty and Walden. He got together with young virtuoso tabla player Zakir Hussain and other Indian musicians, originally for a concert to celebrate the birthday of McLaughlin's then-guru, Sri Chinmoy.

Hussain recalled that McLaughlin "was still deeply involved in Indian tradition, yoga and meditation. He loved that concert we had done, so he discussed it with CBS and they agreed to put it out as a record."

Discussing the fragile concept of East-West musical meetings, Hussain remembered that the group "was one of the first workable combinations. All of us were young and we were open to trying whatever needed to be tried to make it all work. John had enough knowledge of the Indian traditions to cross over and meet up with us and go our way, and we were young enough to learn from him and try what he wanted to try.

"We used to talk for hours about chord changes and how Shankar should try to solo over that, but not like the Indian way where it was just a drone," Hussain continued. "John used to play records with Elvin Jones, Jack DeJohnette and Tony Williams to give me an idea of what jazz drumming was all about. We used to talk for hours in his loft in New York. It was one of the greatest learning peri-

ods for me."

Hussain's relationship with McLaughlin has continued for 30 years, through the latest chapter of the revived Shakti, and including Hussain's playing on *Industrial Zen*. While the original Shakti band found McLaughlin playing an unorthodox acoustic guitar with scalloped frets for more flexible note-bending glissando, his more recent Shakti experience was with electric guitar. After he discovered his old Shakti guitar badly damaged, he plugged in, albeit without the distortion that marks his fusion work.

"Of course, with Shakti, it's a different ballgame," McLaughlin said. "They're such fantastic players and beautiful people. But I'm a Western musician. I want the harmony, I want the drums. I'm a jazz musician. People sometimes don't like the fusion thing, but that's their problem. It's not my problem. That's part of my soul, part of my music and it's part of my history. I have to do it."

Going back to his earliest Mahavishnu era, when he was a devotee of Sri Chinmoy, McLaughlin has infused his music with spiritual elements. He still thinks this way today. "My life revolves around the spiritual dimension," he said. "The cultivation of my interior life is first and foremost. This is what saves me, for want of another word. My personal conviction is that we are alive for one purpose only: to realize what we truly are. Music is my outer way in life. It is a vehicle that I use to illustrate my personal perceptions from time to time.

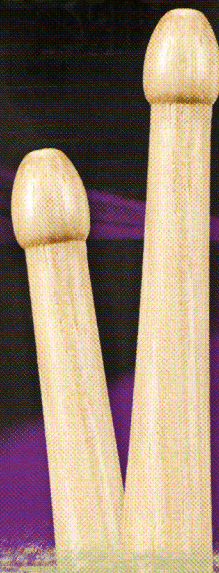
"I also believe that music is the true language of the human spirit," he continued. "When I say 'true,' I mean that we all find ourselves at home in music. It reminds us from where we come, and where we all belong—whatever the kind of music it may be. From time to time, I've considered making an album directly related to my interior life. But when I consider this, I realize that all my music, and every act I make in life, is directly related to my interior life. So I let things come their own way. If it happens, it happens."

Does McLaughlin feel as if he's in a niche of his own devising, in a position that makes him simultaneously an insider and outsider in jazz?

"An insider and outsider are two aspects of one reality," he said. "I don't even consider whether this might be good or bad, since everything in music is good—even bad music. For as long as I can remember, I follow my instincts. They cannot lie to me. People may not understand what I might be trying to do, and I am even surprised myself about where my instincts take me, but I like this."

Still, even at this stage of his musical life, McLaughlin has no idea where his instincts will lead him. "I stopped wondering about that many years ago," he said. "I'm content to let ideas and forms come to me. They always have until now, and I don't see any end to it, other than my own personal end." **DB**

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