

hymns of speed and light

JOHN McLAUGHLIN, STILL FRETTING AFTER ALL THESE YEARS.

By Richard Cook

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JOHN McLAUGHLIN looks well. His skin shines, as if it's had a deep rub with oil of walnut, and with his small bright eyes and ironic smile he has the air of a prince in proud exile, waiting to be asked back.

McLaughlin has never really been away. Fifteen years ago he was the pivotal figure in the breaking of jazz-rock to a vast audience. That was an era of guitar heroes, and his peerless skill on a fretboard was enough to attract an audience that cared little for any jazz articulation. The ensuing time might have dulled his influence—"I don't have any record out, so I don't know why you're here!"—but the reverberations of that work continue to resound. In the late 80s, his classic Mahavishnu Orchestra LPs are finding their way into new collections of compact discs.

"Oh, I think it's always flattering that people find your previous work interesting for a number of years. Any artist has delusions of immortality. My personal view is that when it's finished, it's done. There's nothing you can do with it any more. What's important is today."

"I have my souvenirs, some very nice souvenirs, but I'm alive **now**. If I have a concert tonight, it's the most important concert in the world. If I get called back tomorrow, tonight will be my last concert. That's the most natural attitude I can have.

Even if he is called back, John will still have some new records in the pipeline. He is back with CBS again, though now it's the Masterworks label that will release his albums. It stems from his guitar concerto, due to be released in the autumn, although there are also duo sessions with Jonas Hellborg and a set by his current trio already on tape.

Maybe it was inevitable that McLaughlin would one day turn to the concerto form. When asked originally to do the Rodrigo concerto with the Los Angeles Philharmonic, he demurred, but was persuaded to write his own piece, with Mike Gibbs doing the orchestration. We must wait to hear the LP to see if it's an advance on **Apocalypse**, the album that pitted Mahavishnu against the LSO and hardly the finest hour of either side. What does the new piece sound like?

"I think it's much better that you hear it! Impossible to say. I can say there's this influence, that one, jazz...it doesn't mean anything. What's interesting for me is that all the cadenzas are improvised. That's something they like very much in the classical world, because they've lost that way of working."

McLAUGHLIN'S WORKED in more contexts than most. It's difficult to imagine this

beatific, serene Yorkshireman hammering out rhythm and blues on the same circuit that spawned The Rolling Stones, a quarter century ago. But he was always curious about other corners. When his old chum Graham Bond got him interested in Eastern thinking and music, the kind of fusion that Ravi Shankar and John Mayer were investigating wasn't faraway. And there was jazz, too: when McLaughlin made his first record under his own name in 1969, he played with John Surman and Tony Oxley and called the set **Extrapolation**. It has worn extraordinarily well (and Polydor should reissue it at once): brief, incisive tracks that sublimate blues, hard bop and free playing into a hard, modern intensity that has scarcely dated at all.

Unlike, though, his music with Lifetime and Miles Davis, recorded around the turn of the decade. The guitarist's contribution to the electric Miles of that day was as wayward as everybody else's. Like most of the participants in **Bitches Brew**, **Live/Evil** and **Big Fun**, he gets out occasional sparks in the murky storm of sound. Next to, say, Steve Grossman on "Go Ahead John", he seems to lack any specific sense of purpose. But McLaughlin's key method was already coming clear: his capacity to fuse, to celebrate other genres with a particular, trance-like exultation.

With both the Mahavishnu Orchestra and Shakti, his group with three Indian musicians, it felt less like a new music McLaughlin was playing, more a supercharged trip through long-established forms. The newness was the virtuosity itself; the fusion wasn't between forms, but between genre and expression. McLaughlin's incredibly fast fingers picked off notes and chords and hurled them out at speeds which were overpowering. It's tempting to wonder if he now finds he has any areas of technical prowess left to conquer.

"Oh! It's never-ending," he replies, in his curious mixture of accents. "Never-ending. I think that's part of music. You need means to articulate. Sometimes I bring everything into question, but that's a continuous process"

"I search constantly for new techniques, new forms. I still feel very inarticulate sometimes, musically, but it's often at those moments that I really feel in touch with myself. When I'm really learning. I'm discovering that the old techniques become obsolete. They have to be brought up to date."

Most musicians seem to spend their mature work in a paring away, a getting down to essentials.

"I think that's what I'm saying, but in different words. That's what I mean about coming up to date. Perception is to do with what you consider essential. My dream is to have the kind of technique where I only have to suggest things to the imagination of the listener, and have their imagination play the rest. This may be the highest art in improvisation. I'm working towards it. Slowly."

McLAUGHLIN'S STYLE is actually difficult to catch hold of. On a record such as **Inner Worlds**, the last CBS album by the Mahavishnu clan, he sounds adrift in a welter of guitar-synthesizers, overdubbed parts and sheer bombast: yet even amid all the artificialities of tone and timbre, it sounds eerily like him. On acoustic guitar, in Shakti as much as in his rather demur contributions to Zakir Hussain's lovely ECM record **Making Music**, his chords and twanging single-note lines reveal not so much an individual personality as an exotic, brilliant synthesis.

His great moments have always been hymns of speed and light. "Sister Andrea"

from the live record **Between Nothingness And Eternity**, is one such: the blasting music becomes inward-looking, a vehicle where power and glory celebrate themselves. It's a very different direction to the kind of new urbanity purveyed by such current leaders as Scofield, Frisell and Abercrombie. Does he follow the work of such players?

"Sco I love. He's maybe my most favorite jazz guitarist playing today. Frisell, it's funny but I've never heard him. I heard a guy called Scott Henderson (in Joe Zawinul's band) who I was very impressed with."

"If there's a good guitar player then I want to hear him. It's my instrument. I should know if I want to send someone out to break his hands."

Laughter, although there might be a twinge of genuine menace at the back of McLaughlin's quip. Talking to him, one sometimes detects an iron streak that is not quite the gladsome humility associated with men who've meditated a long time on old, self-sacrificial philosophies. In any event, electric guitarists hardly seem like competition to him: he hasn't picked up an electric guitar for two years.

"For the moment, my interest is in the acoustic guitar. I always played acoustic, even in the most electric bands. It was always the guitar I took to hotels and on the buses. It was very important to me that I could continue the work on the acoustic guitar, from a technical point of view. Acoustic is very demanding. It's the same with keyboards— acoustic pianos you have to fight, dominate, or they'll dominate you."

"But nothing will replace acoustic or electric guitars. No electronic instrument can. You can sample it, but you can't get the feeling, or the sound. You can't imitate the player, or the whole physical process of playing, the battle between man or woman and the instrument."

SINCE DISSOLVING Shakti in 1978, McLaughlin seemed like a player in search of a context. His few records since then have been a mixture of formats, nothing very striking in terms of direction. Does the absence of the huge audience he had for Mahavishnu affect what he does?

"It's the same," he says, a picture of calm and reason. "If you have an audience, whether it's ten or ten thousand, it's still an audience. If you have one person listening, that's just as important. I think it's more relevant to the rock world, where rock stars are subject to the adulation which instrumentalists are rarely subject to. The success of Mahavishnu was something even I didn't understand. But I don't want to abandon the audience and go and live in some ivory tower. Like any artist, I'd love to be adored by everyone in the world. It's that my way in life is to look for new forms and new ways."

That way, at present, is to spend most of his time composing at home, sometimes touring, or instructing his solitary pupil. It's a pity he hasn't shown up more often among the technocrats of today: his cameo shots on Miles Davis's **You're Under Arrest** seemed almost nostalgic. John has a nice story about the making of **Jack Johnson**.

"That's Miles's most favorite record. We were in the studio, Herbie Hancock, Michael Henderson, Billy Cobham and me, and Miles was talking with Teo Macero in the control room for a long time. I got a little bored and I started to play this shuffle, a kind of boogie in E with some funny chords. The others picked it up, and locked in. The next thing, the door opened, and Miles runs in with his trumpet and we played for about 20 minutes. It was a large part of that record. It came out of nowhere."

How would he approach such a brief now, for an electric record?

“Electric guitar? If the great Larry Young were alive, I’d have him with Elvin Jones. **Unity**, that LP with Joe Henderson and Woody Shaw, the feeling there is great. I’d just go in with some heads, a few tunes. Maybe I’ll get to do it one day.”

OK by me.