

# muso in the promisedland

By Paul Stump

(Reprinted from **The Wire** magazine: March 1996)

What's going on? Fusion, that most despised of musical genres, has suddenly become an essential reference point for musicians such as Goldie, LTJ Bukem and Howie B. In turn, a first generation fusion head like **John McLaughlin** is revitalising his career by exploring the new technologies of drum 'n' bass. Paul Stump talks to McLaughlin, and discovers that everything in the jungle is rosy

It's one of the more curious phenomena of recent developments in musical taste. The movers and shakers and cutting-edge crusaders of the sonic millennium, upon whose subversions of past practice and performance rest so many needs and desires, appear more concerned with recreating the music of earlier epochs. Moreover, they are taking their cues from music which, by common consent, has long been branded as culturally and musically irredeemable (or so we thought). For instance: fusion, it seems, still counts.

Even in the futuristic forests of drum 'n' bass, the past protagonists of this most vilified of musical genres exert a powerful hold: LTJ Bukem cites Return To Forever's **Romantic Warrior** as a definitive influence; Goldie goes for The Yellowjackets as his current group-of-choice. Meanwhile in these pages Howie B and The Durutti Column's Vini Reilly have recently solemnly stated their allegiance to John McLaughlin, perhaps the greatest **bête noire** of that whole 70s cheesecloth-clad bacchanalia of speed, solos and Marshall amps.

And so as **bêtes noires** go, John McLaughlin is a pretty happy one right now. After 30 rollercoastering years in music he's hauling himself around the European promotional circuit to publicize a new CD. It's being launched into what appears to be a revival of interest in his music past, but McLaughlin is on a roll in 96; installed in London's Langham Hilton hotel he looks the picture of expansive well-being.

The new record, **The Promise**, is billed as a kind of retrospective, which fits neatly with the apparent 'rediscovery' of his back catalogue by a new generation. "I don't look at it that way, though, as an autobiography," McLaughlin claims. "Let's face it, every album is autobiographical in some way."

Like his younger admirers, McLaughlin is still a fusion-head; but he is not that interested in fusion as a generic term in the popular context of loud muso thrasherama, regarding it more as a framework for making music as he sees fit. Where did the drive to combine musical styles come from?

"If anything, I would pick out the first time I heard the collaboration between Miles and Gil Evans. You must remember the progress of my musical learning. I started off with classical, then moved to Mississippi delta blues, then flamenco, and then jazz.

Yes, **Sketches Of Spain** and especially **Miles Ahead**, for me one of the greatest collaborations ever: there's blues and jazz and flamenco chords and Miles just killing on it—such sensitivity. Two separate cultures, but they're made for each other. Coltrane saw that too."

"Going even further back, what about Ravel? The **Piano Concerto For The Left Hand** and so much else. Is he trying to do fusion? I don't think so. He just loved Spanish music, ended up writing it into his own work, he loved it so much. Stravinsky loved jazz—and Ravel too, again. How about his **Piano Concerto In G**? Very jazzy. Ravel visited America and heard jazz, he was astounded by it. He transcribed a jazz trumpeter improvising, and back in Paris showed the transcription to his favorite trumpeter, who told him it was unplayable. Then there's Bartok and his use of Slavonic folk tunes. I'm not trying to write fusion music, [but] when I write, styles tend to fall in with each other."

They seem to be falling in with each other slightly differently these days. Much early 70s fusion was a torrent of Heavy Metal sound and fury (think of the near hysterical intensities of McLaughlin's **Devotion** album, or his collaboration with Tony Williams and Larry Young in Lifetime, or with Carlos Santana on **Love, Devotion, Surrender**, and we haven't even mentioned The Mahavishnu Orchestra...). Those characteristics have now dissipated, to be replaced by the more fluid, post-bop orientated jazz input of John Scofield, Bill Frisell and even McLaughlin's own Free Spirits trio with organist Joey De Francesco and drummer Dennis Chambers. **The Promise** features two crowd-pleasing, steroid-charged supersessions (with Mike Brecker, Jim Beard, Don Alias, Chambers et al); but even here, the music is more freeform than anything the guitarist has done since the organised cacophony of **Extrapolation** (1969).

"Yeah," says McLaughlin, "but there's a mean backbeat on those new tracks, because ironically enough I wanted to move in a more **rock** direction. When you get [James] Genus and Chambers and Alias doing this incredible fatback boogaloo, and a sax player like Mike, who's probably the greatest jazz horn player today but who knows all about rock, you're going to get a harder feel."

Sounds like a new map of muso hell, right? But the kind of robotic, giga-funk noodling customarily associated with those names is surprisingly absent over rubber-burning tempos, the group kicks up some seriously raucous noise. "Right! We get this structure but only as an anchor, as a launching pad for...delirium, where we can play alone but also play with and over each other, to get up each other's noses."

So we're talking collective improvisation, no less. Not a Mahavishnu trait, surely? "We used to do that—on stage. And anyway, don't forget, collective improvisation isn't that new—it goes all the way back to New Orleans."

In **The Wire** 142, Simon Hopkins suggested that McLaughlin's bugbear was that his compositions were so dazzlingly proficient they tended to detract from the spontaneity of the pieces (McLaughlin takes this graciously and as a compliment) and diffused the energy of the early Mahavishnu Orchestra experiments. What does McLaughlin think of that period today? What, for instance, does he make of his 1974 orchestral monster, **Apocalypse**?

"It's great! I love my old records—with all their glaring, horrible faults! I know what

my intentions were then. They're the same today, but you can look back in hindsight and see what went wrong. Sometimes I hear my old stuff and feel great, and then I hear something and go, 'Shit, what a stupid thing to play...I mean **why?**' But some of it's terrific. There's a tape I've got of the Mahavishnu Mark One in Cleveland in 1971 and it is so **on**, it's frightening. I was on my knees to the record label: 'Put it out, put it out, **please!**' It was a great time."

"Sure, there were problems. Come the final six months of Mahavishnu Mark One, neither Jan Hammer or Jerry Goodman were speaking to me. They were just behaving like assholes, I suppose. The band split up, but after a while Jerry called me up and we made it up and we're good friends again. But Jan..." McLaughlin sighs. "He still won't talk to me. I've tried to patch it up but he—well, he's got Bombay Rice or Miami Vice or whatever it is and he may be a millionaire but he's still acting like an asshole."

McLaughlin is a little ambivalent now about jazz rock. After 1976, he says, most of it was "terrible"; mechanical, West Coast coffee-table, lava-lamp funk, music for elevators with the down button jammed on. But by then McLaughlin had other fish to fry; while hawking his speed-freak, ear-blasting Mahavishnu chops around the world's stadia, his parallel project, the all-acoustic Shakti, was taking things a little more gently.

A natural outgrowth from the unplugged ethnofusion of 1970's **My Goals Beyond** (a groundbreaking and still underrated session that developed out of McLaughlin's sessions with Miles on **Bitches Brew** and **In A Silent Way**), Shakti was one of the first genuine attempts by a popular Western musician to use Eastern musical language other than an adjunct to his own; to attempt to communicate with Oriental sonic vernacular on its terms.

"I was studying South Indian music, Karnatic music and vina [a seven-stringed precursor of the sitar] at Wesleyan University in 70-71," recalls McLaughlin. "I love the vina. If you hear Dagha play vina, for example, it'll blow your mind. I've been attracted to Indian thought for a long time, since before Indian music, and I'm still attracted today [along with Santana and Alice Coltrane, in the 1970s McLaughlin was an acolyte of the guru Sri Chinmoy]. I started hanging out with these Indian pals I made at Wesleyan because a lot of us were of the same age group. One day Ragavhan—my teacher's percussionist, later in Shakti—introduced me to his nephew, [violinist] L. Shankar. I knew Zakir Hussain from when I studied Hindustani music in 69. So we started to play together—for fun, at first, then a few little concerts in churches, schools, things like that. It was beautiful—North Indian [Zakir] and South Indian [Ragavhan, L. Shankar]."

The influence of the subcontinent infuses all of McLaughlin's music— rhythmically in the organically shifting polyrhythms that frequently launch his solos, and also in the yearning harmonic intervals that give his finest melodies a ghazal-like lyricism. The influence of actual Indian performance is duly acknowledged on **The Promise** on a track called "The Wish", which features Trilok Gurtu on percussion, and a strange R&B voicing hidden in the melody. It's less a homage to Shakti, though, than to the ECM album **Making Music**, cut by Zakir Hussain in 1986 with the help of McLaughlin, Jan Garbarek and flautist Hariprasad Chaurasia. "I should have been with [Chaurasia] in South India right now," exclaims McLaughlin. "I was supposed to be working with him and this great sarod player. And Jan Garbarek met me recently and suggested we do

something like [**Making Music**] again. I'd love to...Manfred Eicher was a bit..." McLaughlin laughs. "He was a bit, shall we say, overpowering to work with, but it was a wonderful project to be involved in."

Perhaps the most interesting tracks on **The Promise** are two minute-long miniatures: "English Jam", a Frisell-like furnace of guitar noise; and the very complex "Tokyo Decadence", which, in a neat closure of the circle, features McLaughlin getting to grips with the rhythmic rigours of drum 'n' bass.

Perhaps it's inevitable that a musician like McLaughlin should have made the complexities of the programming even more busy and intricate than ever, but "Tokyo Decadence" is an undeniably exciting rapprochement, even if, at one minute in length, the experiment seems a trifle on the tentative side.

"Jungle is brilliant!" he enthuses. "There's good stuff, and of course so much of it. I took some drum 'n' bass tapes and played them to Dennis Chambers. He couldn't believe it. He said: 'Who the fuck is that?' Of course it wasn't anybody playing, nobody could play like that, not even Dennis. But that's the technology now, that's what you can do, and you have to use the technology to its full extent if that's the music you want to play, if you want to do new things. I intend to do plenty of things with this technology."

This is refreshing to hear. McLaughlin's Mahavishnu career—in its 70s incarnation, anyway; the guitarist formed a second, generally lamentable, version of the group, Mahavishnu Mark Two, in the mid-80s—submerged itself forever in the analogue morass of **Inner Worlds** (1976), a bilious, all-delay-systems-go freak-out of phasing, flanging and Echoplexing.

But like few of his contemporaries, he seems willing to address the outer limits of today's technology as willingly as he did those of yesterday.

"I did an interview for **Down Beat** and I told them what a great musician I think Prince is," says McLaughlin. "I still think he's a genius. I had Ronny Jordan come up to me after the same interview in which I hadn't been too kind to him, advised him to loosen up, get less commercial or something, and he was pissed! He said, 'Move over, you've had your day, it's our turn now.' Well, maybe I'm an old hippy, but I want to hang around and find out exactly what's going on today."

Perhaps it's a measure of how all those years of critical opprobrium have consecrated the image of McLaughlin as unreformable, a clean-cut has-been, but it's vaguely amusing to hear him talking this way, to even equate him with any manner of exploration into the new: for instance, he talks enthusiastically of how he insisted that he travel to London from Paris not by plane but by Eurostar ("It's brilliant"), and refers to the fact that the cover of the new album is a stereo image: "I'm an old hippy remember?" Maybe so. But if the likes of Howie B and Vini Reilly have anything to do with it, McLaughlin the old hippy is welcome to hang around as long as he likes, and he can go on playing as fast as he likes. The question, though, has to be asked; **why** so fast?

"You have to go back to my formative influences again," he explains. "I heard Coltrane play, Pharaoh Sanders. Sheets of sound, they called it; just so many notes. I wanted to play like them. Listen to Miles playing live in Stockholm in 1960. On the CD

there's an interview, and the interviewer asks Coltrane why he plays like that, he can't understand it. But Coltrane can't explain it, nobody can. But lots of us listened to these guys, took Coltrane as a role model, and in the 60s, if you wanted to get on, to be the best or to get work even, you had to play fast to keep up with people. It's a benchmark. You feel you have to measure up. You have to get your chops right to please people, because if you don't, you're in trouble, they'll find you out. But of course, there's a danger of becoming too technical. Either that or you fumble. It's a fine line. But every generation has its own standards. It shouldn't always be just about speed. With me it just happens to be the way I play."

"Anyway, it's always guitarists that get characterised as being 'too fast'. It's just the image of the guitarist; like bass players are always defined by how funky they are, and saxophonists for how 'out' they might be." It feels like McLaughlin is glad to move the subject away from guitars. "In the end you can really talk too much about picking technique and right and left hand positioning."

McLaughlin's outlook on life betrays a conciliatory internationalism and openness which mirrors the delicate miscegenation which his music rests on. He now lives in Monaco and regards Europe as his home.

"I moved from New York in 82," he says. "Frankly, I missed the linguistic diversity of Europe. I suppose I just got fed up of hearing English all the time. I don't come back to England much now. What really pisses me off is this Anglophonic arrogance, this English-speaking domination of the world. I bullshit my way in German, I bullshit my way in Italian because it's not English and I enjoy that and others enjoy it because it shows you're making an effort to speak their language and accept it and them."

"England I don't care too much for anymore. London's OK. But elsewhere..."

He looks to be having a good enough time in England now. Fans are bursting out of the unlikeliest closets, and despite the silvering of his hair, he looks, at 53, ten years younger, immaculate and at ease in his trademark white turtleneck. He exudes the unostentatious comfort of the new monied middle class of mainland Europe. But with McLaughlin comfort doesn't mean complacency. His music may have found a new audience, but he knows these things go in cycles, that the new generation of musicians who acknowledge his legacy are the natural outgrowth of a preceding generation that sought to bury it.

"It's life. I've been at rock bottom, and now I'm up. Who knows what'll come next? It's the way it goes. You can't expect music to stand still because your life doesn't stand still. It doesn't always reflect your life, doesn't always change like your life changes, but it does change. It's got to. There's always the promise of something new, good or bad. That's what the title means: **The Promise**. You don't know what it is, but you know there's the promise of something different around every corner."