

MAGAZINE SECONDS

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JOHN McLAUGHLIN



JOHN McLAUGHLIN is the most influential instrumentalist of both post-Beatles Rock and post-Coltrane Jazz. He combined the guitar styles of those two eras into “Fusion,” one of the most misunderstood and misappropriated musical genres.

John was once in a trio with Jack Bruce and Ginger Baker, and was replaced by Eric Clapton, in what later became Cream. Then, Tony Williams offered him a chance to join his new band, Lifetime. John proceeded to sweep the cobwebs outta Jazz with his big, Rock-riff-ridden “fuck you” to the dinner-music crowd. He then played on Miles Davis’ Bitches Brew and In A Silent Way, wherein he fused the soul of Jazz with the genitalia of Rock. In ’72 he formed Mahavishnu Orchestra, releasing the The Inner Mounting Flame — a journey through time at breakneck speeds disguised as psycho acid metal instrumentals. An arena-level Fusion act, the band was eroded by internal squabbles, and fell apart. He toured and recorded extensively with Paco DeLucia, Larry Coryell, Al DiMeola — the list goes on and on. But who has heard any of this? Now on Verve, he’s still the best.

***“The real American culture –
which I think the greatest example of is contemporary Jazz
– it’s an international language now”***

SECONDS: *You came to prominence playing guitar with Miles Davis. How did that experience affect your subsequent work?*

McLAUGHLIN: Long before I met Miles, I was under his influence. The first time I heard Miles, I was 15 years old, and it had an extraordinary effect on me. He was kind of like my school. I’d been listening to Charlie Parker and the hard Bop thing — you know, the West Coast school that was so predominant in the ’50s.

When Miles came out with his first record with Coltrane and Cannonball Adderly, it was like a revolution. Of course, to meet him at 27 years old, and to play with him and work with him, which I continued to do until the last Paris concert — What can I say about the influence of Miles? As an artist? One of the great artists of the 20th Century. I put him on par with people like Picasso or Stravinsky. To work with Miles was a tremendous thrill, of course, but it was also tremendous just to be around an artist of his stature, to learn from him, and to listen to what he had to say. He had suggestions about what I should do in what situation and what he gave me is invaluable. Of course, I loved him, too, as a person and a musician. I miss him. To this day, I miss him very much.

SECONDS: *Why did you leave his band?*

McLAUGHLIN: I never left Miles. I started to play with Lifetime, which was Tony Williams and Larry Young, in ’69, but at the same time, the next day after I arrived in New York, Miles asked me to go in the studio and do *In A Silent Way*. Every time he had a record, he’d call me. I became very close to him and I’d go to his house, do concerts and gigs. In 1970, about 18 months later, I remember doing a gig with Miles at Lenny’s On The Turnpike, a club up in Massachusetts. Just before that, Miles had asked me to join his band permanently. I’d put so much effort into Lifetime with Tony and Larry, which was a crazy beautiful trio. He offered me a lot of money, too, which was nice.

SECONDS: *Lifetime was the ensemble that you worked out a lot of your ideas in, right?*

McLAUGHLIN: With Lifetime, I was writing a lot. I had all these crazy ideas that I could play with Tony, who’s still one of the revolutionary drummers, and with the late great Larry Young. There was a lot of groundwork I’d laid with Lifetime that came out subsequently with the Mahavishnu Orchestra. I was doing this gig, which was one of the last I did with Miles for a few years, and we were talking after the gig and

he asked me, “Why don’t you form your own band?” Really, it was the last thing I expected from Miles, but I had such a regard for him that if he told me something, I believed it. I thought, “Oh, he really thinks I’m great, so I should do it.” From that point I started to form the first Mahavishnu Orchestra.

SECONDS: *Prior to that was —*

McLAUGHLIN: I did *Devotion* with Buddy Miles in 1969, who was playing with Jimi at the time. I had a chance to play with Dave Holland who was a great

bass player from England.

SECONDS: *There was starting to be more of a Rock and Blues sensibility in your work at that point, right?*

McLAUGHLIN: That started a long time before, because when I was about 19 or 20 years old in London, there were two clubs that everybody played. Anyone who was in a band played those two clubs — the Flamingo and the Marquee. It was the days when Eric Clapton was playing with Spencer Davis and Mick Jagger was singing with Alexis Korner, Charlie Watts was playing drums with Ginger Baker, I was playing with Ginger Baker and Graham Bond, it was just like jam sessions. That was the time of the big Blues revival or movement that swelled up at the end of the ’50s and ’60s in England. You had these Jazz musicians — of which I consider myself — jamming with Blues players and the end result is Rhythm & Blues. You take Rhythm & Blues away from Jazz and there’s not much left. I was always a great fan of Charles Mingus. I don’t know if you ever listened to his albums.



JOHN McLAUGHLIN

SECONDS: *Yeah, I know his stuff well.*

McLAUGHLIN: This guy was down. He was very sophisticated, but really down Rhythm & Blues — it was beautiful. At this period, it was very fertile for everybody. Cream came out of that, of course Eric and Blind Faith. Jack Bruce and Ginger Baker and I had a band with Dick Heckstall-Smith who was also playing with Spencer Davis, Alexis Corner, and Graham Bond.

SECONDS: *Some of your contemporaries, like Eric Clapton, went on to do the big Rock thing, but you went on to do Jazz. Was there a point when you almost joined one of the famous Rock acts of the '70s?*

McLAUGHLIN: I've always been very nervous about selling out. There's a risk, that's a choice everybody has to make individually. I was too marked by great music already. I mean, I was playing with a hard Bop quartet when I was 15 years old. I wasn't playing, really, I was trying to play. I was steeped in Jazz music. Not only that, but the first guitar music I had when I was eleven years old was the Mississippi Blues and that was some big shock to me. From the time I was eleven, American music had such an influence on the way I played, the way I read sheet music, and just in general. The real American culture — which I think the greatest example of is contemporary Jazz. It's an international language now, but I think it's really the cream of American culture, and I was deep in the influence of it. I still am. I had too many crazy ideas buzzing around in my head, and it continues to this day. The way I figure it, if music doesn't lie to me — and music doesn't lie to anybody — if I just follow my nose, follow my instincts, I'll find it. It's understandable people would want to play in a big band and make all the money, but you run into problems. When I broke up the Mahavishnu Orchestra in '75, I'd already been playing with Shakti for three years, in little concerts in a church or in a school. It got to the point, though, where I just wanted to do that. The end of '75 was the end of an era. But when something dies, something else is born. When I told everyone I was going to play with this band from now on, I got a lot of flak from managers, record companies, and promoters. They said, "What are you doing playing acoustic guitar with these Indians?" But that's the deal, if you wanna go for it, you gotta take the risks

and the responsibilities. I'm happy to do that, I just trust in the music and see what happens.

SECONDS: *If I could get back to the first incarnation of Mahavishnu Orchestra. It seems there was an Eastern sensibility brought into it. That paralleled the drug scene and the psychedelic scene. How did you see your music differing from the other contemporary music?*

McLAUGHLIN: I come out of a psychedelic generation and Flower Power and LSD and all that. It was a beautiful time for me. I look back on the '60s with great affection, it was a wonderful period, personally. Of course, there was that spiritual search, but that had started a long time ago for me also. I don't know why I'm the way I am, who knows why they are different? I don't even question it anymore. In the early '60s, before acid and before Flower Power and before everything, I was studying contemporary religion simply to find out what's going on. If you just stop to think for a second, it's a whole monumental miracle. The consummation of all that at the end of the '60s and the early '70s was the application of this knowledge into life. For me it was a question of discipline. I felt really undisciplined and I wanted to try to find out what meditation is, to try to learn some techniques. Basically, you try to find out who you are. That is the question in life. That's the question eventually everybody asks themselves.

SECONDS: *That was the point you first worked with Sri Chinmoy?*

McLAUGHLIN: Absolutely. I became a disciple, teaching with him for five years from 1970 to the end of '75. I never went for this la-de-da, let's just tranquil-out stuff. Life is not like that to me. Life is very urgent, and at this period it was loud, too. Life was thrilling, and the music should be thrilling, too. I didn't go for this kind of music — it's very sweet, very sugary, and very like, "Don't disturb me." I'm not into that. Music should shock sometimes.

SECONDS: *So you developed Fusion at that point.*

McLAUGHLIN: I didn't really try to develop anything, to tell you the truth. It was really my Blues influences which I started at age eleven, and I hung out a lot with Miles, and he was listening more to James Brown and Sly and the Family Stone, and I really dug

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that. Before I left the UK, I was playing with a Funk band covering all of James Brown’s hits and I dug James Brown and Sly and the Family Stone, it was something else. And Miles was really into it and so this whole thing, the recording, then we did *Bitches Brew*, and he thought this was a landmark record. We shouldn’t make any mistake about it, this was an unbelievable record he did. All the great musicians were there and Miles just took everybody and said, “Let’s do this.” And the result was really astounding, that had a great influence on me. I could achieve the feeling of the influence that Miles was coming under with the R&B, the Funk, the Soul, in a way, but it’s not really the same thing. Sly and the Family Stone, how would you call that? There’s no name for it, it’s just great music.

SECONDS: *It was literally the fusion of Jazz and R&B.*

McLAUGHLIN: I guess so, if you want to put a label on it. All these influences and Jimi, of course, Jimi blew everybody’s mind, including mine. Jimi was a real revolutionary — he turned the guitar world on its head. Miles had never seen Jimi, and I remember taking him down to see that *Monterey Pop* film in the Village. When he saw Jimi, he just flipped out. He was a sweet person, but what a tremendous guitar player. Most guitar players were influenced by Jimi, certainly I was. I was playing more and more with Tony and Miles, and the music was getting louder and louder. And it wasn’t just me with Mahavishnu Orchestra, everybody was playing loud. You ever hear Sly live?

SECONDS: *No.*

McLAUGHLIN: Unbelievable, but beautiful. Jimi was loud, man, too much. The drums were getting stronger, and I was playing acoustic-electric guitar and I was fighting. It was tough. I had to get a solid body guitar and you start to play differently. The music changes, and finally, at the last six months

of Lifetime I was really starting to develop some themes and concepts — the concepts I was to develop with the first Mahavishnu Orchestra. I wanted strong music. When Billy Cobham came, he only had one bass drum and I told him to get another one, to use two bass drums. He said I was out of my mind, but I told him to just check it out, to try it. Finally, he tried it and he loved it. He’d just be bashing on those drums. It was a great band, that first one. Too bad it didn’t last very long.

SECONDS: *Why didn’t it last?*

McLAUGHLIN: I think we had too much success too quickly, to tell you the truth. I was always able to keep good relationships with Billy and with Rick Laird, but Jerry Goodman and Jan Hammer, they flipped out. I think we had

too much success, it was too easy, you know what I’m saying? What a shame, because I tried to get it back. I tried over the last ten years to get everyone together to do a reunion.

SECONDS: *Was there a schism between you guys? Was it based on drugs versus religion or something?*

McLAUGHLIN: No, nobody was doing drugs in the band. Everybody’s got a right to do their thing. The schism happened after I finished a combined tour with Santana in ’72. We finished in Hawaii and I was picking up the rest of the guys to do a tour in Japan. I got on the plane with Billy, and for some reason Jan and Jerry didn’t wanna talk to me anymore, so it was very difficult in Japan. I thought they’d cool out, but by the second night they still weren’t talking to me. I went to them and said, “Look, you can call me the worst kind of shit in the world, I don’t care, but whatever it is, just spit it out. Let’s get it out, I don’t wanna play music with people who don’t talk to me.” Rick, who was the bass player, said, “Yeah, why don’t you tell him? You’re always telling me.” But they wouldn’t tell me and they just turned on their heels and walked out. This went on for a whole weekend and I said, “Listen, I don’t want to



JOHN McLAUGHLIN

live like this. We've got to bring this thing to a resolution for the band." I was so stupid, that's really dumb.

SECONDS: *Did you ever find out what the problem was?*

McLAUGHLIN: No, I still don't know. That's far out, huh? We had gigs for like, six months. It was just stupid, it was silly. I couldn't get them to talk to me, Jerry and Jan. Billy and Rick were fine, y'know. It was one of the most stupid events of my life. During that period when these two guys weren't speaking to me, we made a studio recording in London that was really great. And they said, "No, we don't want this record to come out. We don't like this record, we object." I should've just said, "Fuck you" and just put it out, but we did a live recording in Central Park instead. It was a really nice concert, but the studio album was really special. I don't know, maybe they'll release it one day.

SECONDS: *Was the second incarnation of the band an attempt to recreate the first one?*

McLAUGHLIN: No, no, no. It was a great band and I was happy just to be in it. But by the time we got to 1973 I was like — the first thing I did in 1973 was I recorded with the London Symphony Orchestra. In that band there was a string quartet, Jean Luc Ponty on lead violin, Narada Michael Walden playing drums, Ralph Armstrong on bass — a great bass player. After that deal, this orchestral nightmare — that was a real experience. We played live with the Buffalo Symphony. We went on the road with an eleven piece band but I really liked it, I was into it. The music was different, I had new concepts that I wanted to try out. When we finally made *Visions Of The Emerald Beyond*, that actually, for me, was one of the greatest records of this genre.

SECONDS: *I agree.*

McLAUGHLIN: That record is something else. It's beautiful. For me, personally, to this day it stays beautiful and I'm really happy we made it. By 1973, I'd been studying South Indian classical music theory at Wesleyan University in Connecticut and I was coming more under the influence of new concepts and new ways of looking at music. I'd already hooked up with Zakir Hussain and Shankar.

SECONDS: *This is L. Shankar, right?*

McLAUGHLIN: Yeah, right. And we started to do these little concerts in '74 and in between time I felt the band was overweight,

so I started to lose people. We ended up as a quartet, which I liked. There was more space, it was more open, I could extend myself more and look for new ways in live playing. At the same time I was doing Shakti with the little concerts, Mahavishnu Orchestra did the final studio record in '74 or '75. When I finished it I knew it would be our last record. Narada went on to become one of the greatest producers in America today. So that brings us to the end of that period and I began really to concentrate more and more on guitar.

SECONDS: *Then you did Inner Worlds.*

That was distinguished from the other Mahavishnu stuff because it didn't have a violin on it.

McLAUGHLIN: No violin, right. And that was the first time I ever experimented with a guitar synthesizer, which was really an elephant, let me tell you. All in all, it was a volatile time for me in every way — in the particular path I was following with Sri Chinmoy, I was feeling some dissatisfaction in that sense. In life, nothing is separate and I think that translates to your music and to life in general. Shortly after that I folded the band and left Sri Chinmoy and the movement.

SECONDS: *Was it an amicable departure?*

McLAUGHLIN: Absolutely! He's an absolutely beautiful man. But I don't think you have to be afraid to change, that's my philosophy in life. It's not that I'm being capricious or anything, but I think if you don't listen to your inner voice, you end up in trouble. I pay attention to what's going on inside of me because I want to stay in harmony with myself; I don't want to be in conflict in any way with myself. I think that's one of the reasons why I didn't want to play in some band and make a lot of money. I'd rather be happy with what I have and just work and develop as a person, as a human being, and as a musician.

SECONDS: *I'd like to ask you about the Shakti period. What criticism about that period bothers you the most?*

McLAUGHLIN: "Why don't you play electric?"

SECONDS: *That's one of the fundamental questions — it's always been electric versus acoustic, right?*

McLAUGHLIN: Curiously enough, with Shakti I lost some fans, but I gained some others. But, so what? In the end, the listener

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has got to be able to trust me. If I sell out, then I sell the listener out. I don’t know how it really works, but that’s how it works for me. People know that if I make a new formation — they know I’m not gonna sell out, I’m not selling anybody out and I’m certainly not going to sell myself out. We’re all in it together. Shakti had some kind of popularity. In fact, I got awards in Italy for contributions to music with the Shakti group, can you believe that?

I just had to do that, and I was very happy to do it. And then we had the One Truth Band for about 18 months in which Shankar really tried to come more into the Western world.

SECONDS: *At the time of the One Truth Band, ’78-’79, there was a reaction to the opulence and the baroque-ness of the Fusion you were doing. How did that affect you, when Punk came*

along and the minimalist stuff came out?

McLAUGHLIN: The minimalists were under the influence of Indian music. If you go back, the instigator of all the minimalists was LaMonte Young, who was an American that’d been under the influence of Indian music for a real long time.

SECONDS: *How about the Punk stuff?*

McLAUGHLIN: I really liked it, I dig that, I mean in small doses, but I liked it.

It’s a strange musical expression but it’s more like a social expression. They’re all expressions of a growing consciousness of the young generation. They’re all looking for their way, we’re all looking for our way in life, collectively and individually. The young generation, every time they’re looking for a new way. I remember when I played with the first Mahavishnu Orchestra and some Jazz musician came up to me and said, “What is that? This loud shit, man, what is that?” And

we said, “That’s the way it is, y’know?” I like to check things out, I like to know what’s going on.

SECONDS: *How do you see yourself, in terms of your impact?*

McLAUGHLIN:

From time to time I’ll hear a record and recognize some things, but I’m so much involved with what I’m doing from day to day, that I don’t really have time to think about it. Life

is very short and I’ve been very lucky. I’ve had a great life, but I’ve got so much work left to do. I’m just trying to do what I can before my number gets called.

You know what I’m saying? ●●●

