

BLUES

John McLaughlin has been part of some of history's most celebrated leftfield albums. His new album is a heartfelt tribute to one he wasn't *Words Ciarán Tracey*

Ride cymbals tinkle. Tension builds as a charismatic saxophone bursts into a non-stop expression that would take decades to fully interpret. John Coltrane, with *A Love Supreme*, had just redefined jazz.

It was a record that in 1965 affected a young guitarist called John McLaughlin more than he could know – and 45 years later, after years as a bona fide guitar legend, he's composed his own homage.

"I gotta tell you right up front, I didn't even have an intention of recording last year. The music started arriving really out of the blue."

Out of the blue is one way to put it. John McLaughlin is a guitarist who has played on some of the most important records ever – jazz warlock Miles Davis' *Kind Of Blue* being the most important of them all.

"When music comes to me, it comes with a certain character, which tells me which way to go. This time its character really started reminding me of this pivotal period in my life, when *A Love Supreme* came out. When I heard it, it just killed me. It was my school."

Supreme enlightenment

John reminisces about just why *A Love Supreme* was so important. As a youngster, he says, he'd just started his own journey of spiritual enlightenment when he heard it. The resonance would ultimately lead to his own quest for that same enlightenment through the Mahavishnu Orchestra and Shakti. Coltrane, however, had set him on the path.

"I couldn't understand the music at all. It was so beyond me, I was baffled. There was a poem that John Coltrane had written on the back of the LP – at that time it was perhaps even more important than the music, because it made me aware that whatever he was saying in this prayer was

inside the music. It was my ignorance that was preventing me from understanding it. At that time I was already starting to find a spiritual identity in my life, and you can't imagine how much that poem was worth to me."

If you're familiar with McLaughlin's particularly challenging style of improvised jazz, you'll find it hard to believe he's baffled by anyone. Few of us regular Joe guitarists can even really begin to understand what he's doing, let alone his idol.

"Oh gee! That's too bad!" he laughs, considering if his own dextrous improvisational playing is similarly out of reach. "In jazz, you have to improvise. That's one of the things I love about it. To really improvise, and to be free and who you are, you need self-knowledge. And self-knowledge is the way of the spirit."

Spiritual dimensions

This album isn't an out and out tribute – nor does it contain reinterpretations, covers or anything directly related to Coltrane's work. So just what is this untouchable spirit that John's referring to – and where do we hear it?

"It's in Coltrane himself and the complicity of the musicians around him. It's clear that he had been on this spiritual way of enlightenment or self-discovery for some time. He single-handedly introduced what I'd call the spiritual dimension into jazz music with this one recording."

"I don't believe you can be one way in music and one way in life. That's why the music was so inspiring for me. There was a dimension in the music – I felt it, though

I couldn't understand it, and I knew it was just up to me to play more, work more, study more. And I haven't stopped since."

McLaughlin's tone on this new album is appreciably softer than that of his fiery days of seventies prog fusion expansiveness. "I'm older!" he explains of the lighter approach. "Even just today I was listening to some tapes of Mahavishnu concerts from 1971 and I mean... we were nuts! In the most beautiful kind of way."

The album's fifth track, *Recovery*, features a couple of roaring bends that immediately recall the John McLaughlin of Mahavishnu Orchestra. While most of it has a pleasantly low-gain and unsaturated sound, these barks are much more akin to his screaming Marshall howl of *Birds Of Fire*. Was it a deliberate look backwards?

"Not consciously, no," he mulls, before describing how it's all one big overview. "The entire recording reflects a chronology of my endeavours over the last 45 years. The track *Discovery* is about finding that magical side to life that we all wonder about and dream of. Then there's *Special Beings* – it's dedicated to so many people who've influenced my life, like a nod of professional gratitude to them."

Elite company

John McLaughlin's performed with many such special beings. From playing on the legendary recordings of Miles Davis to jamming with Jimi Hendrix, his length of tenure has seen him play with some of the most iconic – and daring – musicians of the modern age.

His band nowadays is called *The Fourth Dimension* and features talents such as

"To really improvise, and to be free and who you are, you need self-knowledge. And self-knowledge is the way of the spirit" **John McLaughlin**



Gary Husband on keyboard and drums. One player who stands out on *To The One*, though, is bassist Etienne M'Bappe. His wandering lines are on many occasions as good as the guitar. Then there's second drummer Mark Mondesir, whose light touch and snappy cymbal work are the breath of the album.

"They certainly are. In a way, the drummer is the lungs of the band too. He allows everybody to breathe inside the rhythms. When the drummer has the particular feel and the wonderful rhythm that's so solid, you're just carried along by it and it becomes effortless. You work your whole life to get to that point. Mark and Gary both have a drum kit on stage, and there are times during the concerts when they both play together – it's marvellous."

What so many fans loved about Mahavishnu Orchestra was their rhythmic brio and their colour. The sounds nowadays may be different, but both those characteristics abound throughout *To The One*.

"It isn't that I want to play Mahavishnu-style music again. I'm like a painter, in that I go through this period then another period. I don't even know why I change

between acoustic and electric. I just follow my instincts. If you stay true to yourself, indirectly, you stay true to the people who listen to you.

"I hear a particular sound in my imagination and I just try to work towards it. The form evolves over the years. Mahavishnu was a form. Shakti was a form. All of that stuff which is in my subconscious and my memory, it affects what I do now. I don't listen very often to what I've done in the past because it's in my memory banks anyhow. Sometimes though I make a conscious effort to recall it, just to bring it up to date. It's part of my personal history and I don't want to forget it either."

Silver surfing

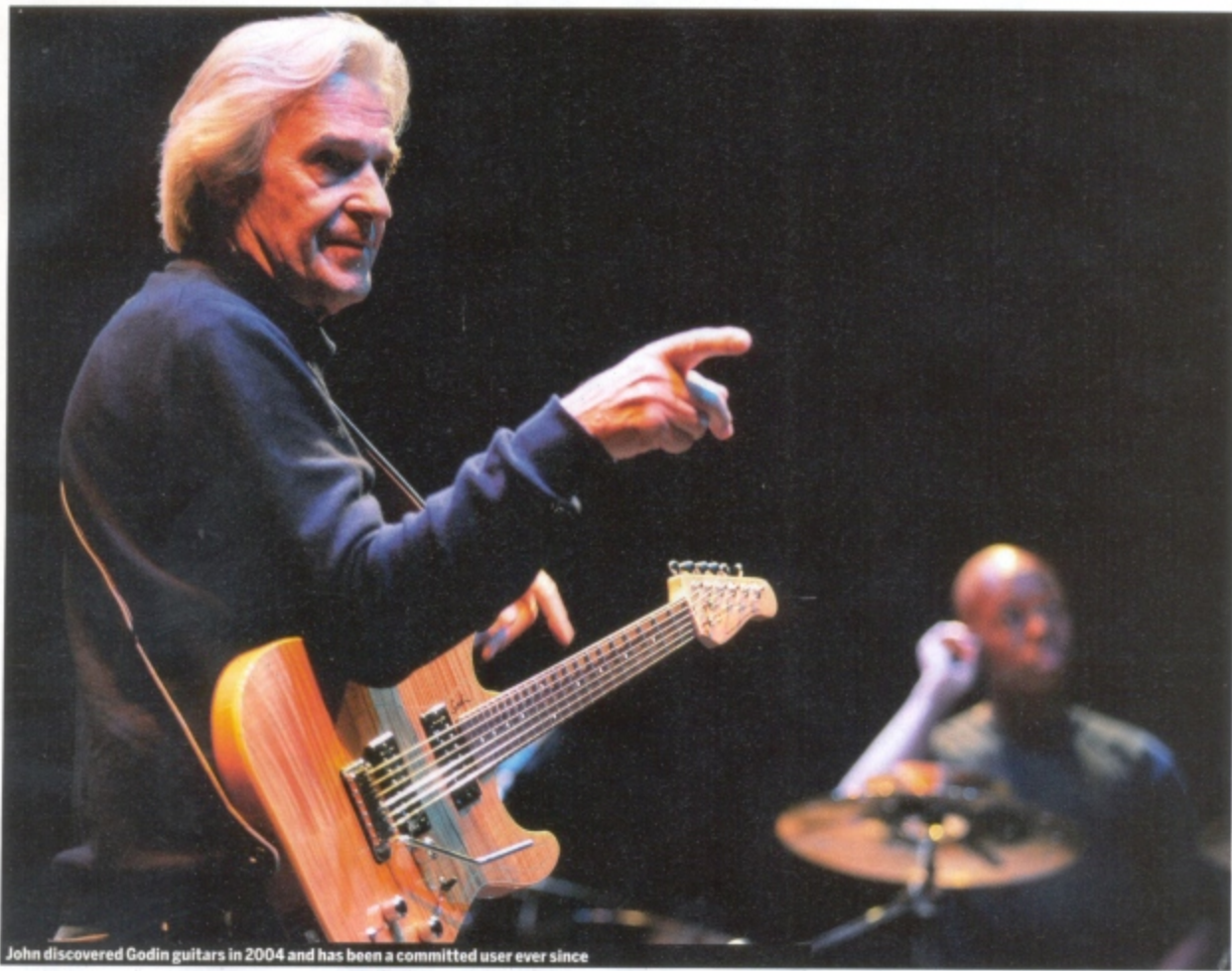
At 68 years of age, you'd think John would be sticking to his faithful old acoustic by now. Far from it: he's currently using an G4 Apple Mac to power his virtual rig, and is truly a silver surfer. Unlike most of the computer-literate musicians, he was doing it the day and hour it arrived.

"You'd be surprised," he agrees. "With Shakti I was using the computer. Even in 1981 there was a computer called the

Fusion Future

Though it's just been released, *To The One* should be heard by everyone seeking challenging new jazz fusion. It complements perfectly those other albums of genius – such as Pat Metheny's *Day Trip* or Allan Holdsworth's *The Sixteen Men Of Tain* – which seem to take jazz into fascinating new dimensions. Both Metheny and Holdsworth owe a huge sonic debt to John McLaughlin – but, as he explains, just because you're the master, doesn't mean you don't have an off night:

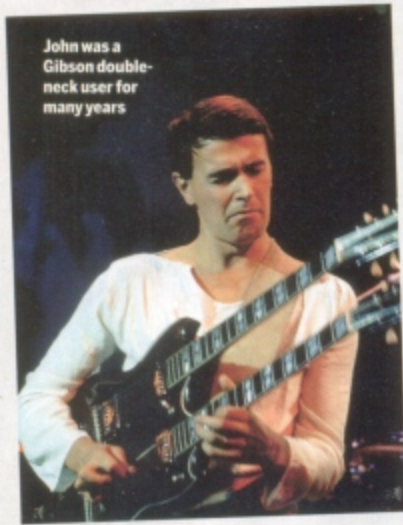
"I'm a fan of both Allan and Pat. I remember, and this is going back a long time, at least 25 years ago, I was at one of Allan's concerts. He said, John, what are you doing here, that was one of the shittiest concerts of my life. I said Allan, if I knew what you were doing I would steal everything you had. He said, No it was terrible. I said, What are you, fishing for compliments? He's a funny guy. I'd love to do a track with him on some album, mine or his, I don't care. I hope it can happen some day."



John discovered Godin guitars in 2004 and has been a committed user ever since



The Fourth Dimension, John's current band, are of course no slouches – they need to keep up with him...



John was a Gibson double-neck user for many years

"I've got some tapes of Mahavishnu concerts from 1971 and I mean... we were nuts! In the most beautiful kind of way" **John McLaughlin**

could then download in PDF format. It hadn't been done before. It was so difficult to get together, but we nailed it. I needed to record the MIDI and the audio at the same time, but to do that I needed a suitable guitar.

"I tried out the Godin and it was so good that I got one right away. That was a blue LG. I first played a Freeway at the Frankfurt music expo a few years ago. It just felt so nice in my arms, and I loved it even more than the LG. It gets chipped, it gets knocked, it gets dinged, but I loved it. I've got some great guitars – a beautiful white Strat, a lovely '58 reissue Les Paul Custom with Alnico pickups – but it's so difficult for me to let go of the Freeway. It's just made for me.

"I've been on Mesa/Boogies for a while now, and I think that's maybe why you can hear Mahavishnu [in the new material]. It's the tube thing. I'd almost given up on tube amps for many years until recently. With the Mesa I don't even have to carry the main amp nowadays. I have their valve preamp, which is phenomenal. They don't even make it any more, you know why? It was so great people were buying it instead of the amps! It's crazy. You can't buy one new, because they don't exist – it was stopping them selling their amps. You have to go on Ebay!"

Friday Night In San Francisco

John McLaughlin is a guitarist who's almost equally as famous for his acoustic playing as his electric work.

"What's strange is that I don't play any acoustic guitar with The Fourth Dimension. I don't have any kind of conscious control over that though," he notes. "I'm still waiting for that music to come to me, and it hasn't arrived for me yet. So I'm basically under instruction."

Though acoustic pieces had been appearing on and off since the start of his career, it took one very special album with two very special other guitarists to show the versatility McLaughlin was capable of.

"I called Paco de Lucía in 1978 and invited him to make a trio, with myself and Larry Coryell, who then made way for Al Di Meola. When I told my label CBS at the time that it would be a great group, they said I was out of my mind. They said I was nuts. Coming after the success of this loud electric band, they almost told me to bugger off with this idea of three acoustic guitarists. And in the end? Almost two million copies sold of Friday Night In San Francisco. It was phenomenal."

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Synclavier. It was about 300 kilos, and what a fantastic machine it was. I remember using it on Live In Montreux in 1984. Then the Mac came out, and with it this amazing new software where we could compose and archive music. It was a magnificent tool."

The forward-looking player needed a forward looking guitar. After years of using vintage double-neck Gibsons, a multimedia project required John to acquire something more versatile. Thus, he found the Godin range – and a love affair was born.

"It's strange how I found the Godin. In about 2004, after years of consideration, I had this idea to make a tutorial DVD. My concept was to have an animated score scrolling along the screen, which you