

## “See clearly ... feel deeply”: Improvisation and Transformation

John McLaughlin Interviewed by Daniel Fischlin<sup>1</sup>

[Streaming audio extract from John McLaughlin’s “To The One”](#)

### Introduction

On the cusp of a North American concert tour in late 2010 and hot off the release of *To the One*, his musical meditation on Coltrane’s *A Love Supreme* and his own lifelong spirit-quest, celebrated guitarist [John McLaughlin](#) agreed to a CSI request for an interview focusing on improvisation and spirituality. In addition to being a prodigious musician in every respect, McLaughlin has had an exceptional, if not unparalleled, trajectory through the crucible of twentieth and twenty-first century music.

His personal musical history encompasses early work with Miles Davis on the seminal recordings *Bitches Brew* (1970) and the earlier *In A Silent Way* (1969), both major moments in the history of jazz and its relation to electric instruments and to other musical genres including rock, funk, and world music.<sup>ii</sup> McLaughlin even merits an eponymously named track on *Bitches Brew* (track 4)—he also, besides playing with the likes of Dave Holland, Herbie Hancock, Jack DeJohnette, Joe Zawinul, Chick Corea, and Wayne Shorter on the Davis sessions, worked closely with the influential American jazz drummer Tony Williams in *The Tony Williams Lifetime*, which fused virtuosic playing with genre-breaking elements of rock, R&B, and jazz.

McLaughlin went on to lead the Mahavishnu Orchestra from 1971 to 1976 (and then later from 1984-87) in a groundbreaking synthesis of extraordinary musicianship and new sonic explorations, before making the leap to world music in the East-meets-West (and North meets South), hybridized super-group Shakti—all this before he had turned thirty-five. In this period, he played with virtually every major figure—including bassists Rick Laird, Jack Bruce, Billy Rich, and Jaco Pastorius—in a scene that spanned jazz, rock, and other emergent forms that have come to be called fusion. He has jammed with Hendrix; played trio concerts with Paco de Lucia and Larry Coryell (and later Al Di Meola); composed and recorded symphonic work, with both the Los Angeles Philharmonic and the London Symphony Orchestra; and recorded with drummer Buddy Miles and organist Larry Young. In 1973, he partnered with Santana to create the remarkable *Love, Devotion and Surrender*, on which McLaughlin also plays the piano. He also has an arms-length list of credits as a sideman for luminaries including Carla Bley, Miroslav Vitous, Dexter Gordon, Joe Farrell, Wayne Shorter, and even the Rolling Stones, among many, many others.

This truncated listing barely gets at the significant number of Indian classical musicians with whom he has worked over many years of substantive activities involving the protracted study of Indian music—from L. Shankar (violin), Zakir Hussain (tabla), Thetakudi Harihara Vinayakram (ghatam), and Ramnad Raghavan (mridangam), in early incarnations of Shakti; to U. Srinivas (mandolin), V. Selvaganesh (percussionist and kanjira virtuoso—also son of original Shakti member Vikku Vinayakram), Shankar Mahadevan (vocals), Shivkumar Sharma (santoor), and Hariprasad Chaurasia (bansuri). This partial listing only hints at a lifelong practice of encounter with some of the most influential Indian musicians of the recent past.

Fellow guitarist Jeff Beck ranks McLaughlin as the “best guitarist alive” (in an interview in 2010 published in *Uncut* magazine) and fellow jazz great Pat Metheny calls McLaughlin “one of the most significant figures in the modern history of the guitar,” going on to state that

it is usually enough for someone to affect the evolution of their instrument once in their career—John has done it at least three times. First, with the amazing and refreshing conceptual leap that was the record *My Goal’s Beyond* where he in one record indicated a way of playing that spawned an entire subgroup of



records by guitar players. The second, and probably most important, was the Mahavishnu Orchestra—along with Weather Report, the next giant leap in the evolution of jazz ensemble playing since the breakthroughs of Ornette Coleman's quartet, the John Coltrane quartet, and the Miles Davis quintet of roughly a decade before. And then, Shakti, where he became the first Western musician to successfully function in an environment that had attracted but eluded western improvising musicians for decades. He is a giant—one of my favorite musicians and composers ever.

McLaughlin's most recent work on 4th Dimension band member Gary Husband's latest solo effort, *Dirty & Beautiful* (Abstract Logix, 2011), is a classic example of extended soloing across multiple musical ideas, feelings, spaces, and sonic textures that are a product of this unique life history in improvisatory musicking.

See clearly, feel deeply indeed: it is a wild understatement to say that McLaughlin's work continues to grow in its expressive power and its distinctive musical insights.

The boxed set of live recordings documenting McLaughlin's extended association with the Montreux Jazz Festival (17 CDs that span 1974-1999) stand alone, as Festival founder Claude Nobs acknowledges, as a testament not only to the "creative power" of McLaughlin and his fellow musicians, but also to the significant range of performance and improvisatory contexts that have made McLaughlin so influential. McLaughlin's 2004 release, through [Mediastarz](#), of *This Is The Way I Do It*, a 3-DVD set of instructional practices related to improvisation, is, as Walter Kolosky notes, a revolutionary way of teaching improvisation to a much wider public. In short order, *This Is The Way I Do It* has established McLaughlin as a remarkable pedagogue, not only for guitarists, but also for a much wider array of instrumentalists and musicians keen to better understand the musical and technical challenges posed by improvisation.

McLaughlin has been at the epicenter of new explorations in jazz and early explorations in the musical synthesis of world music, and has lived through the birth, reputed death, and rebirth of fusion. Along the way, he has played with a veritable who's who of musicians from all over the globe, all while producing a wide-ranging body of compositions and performance activities that have made him the embodiment of improvisational exploration and achievement in multiple musical contexts. Finally, over and above these activities, he has been active and highly influential in developing pedagogies based on his own improvisatory strategies.

Having just turned 69 in January 2011, and with a significant body of new and forthcoming work and a new recording partnership with progressive music entrepreneur Souvik Dutta's [Abstract Logix](#) label, McLaughlin's creative output and musical intensity remain an undiminished, exceptional example of artistic longevity, sustained growth, and innovative exploration.

It is in these contexts that this interview with McLaughlin took place. I had long understood that McLaughlin, in addition to his musical output, has been a consistent voice in debates over musical meaning. By virtue of the uniquely rich body of experience he has in crossing musical borders and cultures, McLaughlin has some very direct ideas about the issues we ended up discussing below.

The extended interview covers everything from deeply held understandings of the transformational power of music to improvisation as a basic underlying aspect of all reality, the intercultural influences that have profoundly marked McLaughlin's own relations to music, and a spiritual vision of the clarity in action that improvisation can bring into presence, musical and otherwise, as a function of discipline and humility.

McLaughlin's articulate, thoughtful, and patient responses to the range of questions I asked leave much food for thought, especially in those places where he challenges reductive notions of what improvisation means. Music, as McLaughlin made explicitly clear in our interview, has the power to transform awareness in an instant while crossing expressive borders in ways that are liberatory, spontaneous, and non-discursive. He argues for embodied practices of being in music that transcend awareness while reinforcing the powerful connections that improvisatory music can make present. Honesty, discipline, freedom, creation, connection, merit, humility—all blend as aspects of the state to which improvisation strives. In this mix remains McLaughlin's mindful insistence that improvisation itself cannot be reduced or contained in discursive form.

In a December 2010 interview on [Al Jazeera](#) with Riz Khan, McLaughlin discusses at length some of his spiritual influences, from early encounters at the London Theosophical Society library with books by Hindu *jnaniji* Sri Ramana Maharshi (1879-1950), whose practice of silence emblemized his state of *moksha* (spiritual release), to the influence of English philosopher Douglas Harding (1909-2007), whom McLaughlin considers to be a Western

analogue of Maharshi. Having come from an agnostic family where God was “just a word,” McLaughlin has spent years exploring matters of the spirit, from these early encounters to later encounters with Sufism (the Islamic mystical practice of coming into the presence of the Divine), five years as a follower of Indian spiritual teacher Sri Chinmoy (1931-2007), and a profound experience at a Trappist monastery that changed his spiritual direction away from Chinmoy.

In the interview with Khan, McLaughlin notes how Miles Davis served as a “guru to me” and recalls that it was Davis who, sometime in 1970, told him it was time for him to form his own band, a directive that led to the creation of the Mahavishnu Orchestra and a contract with legendary American producer Clive Davis at CBS—all this to prove to Miles that he was indeed “right” about it being time for McLaughlin to fly on his own. McLaughlin remains modest about this journey: “the spiritual aspect of music [. . . is] all so much blah blah in the end because everyone is spiritual, we’re all spiritual beings [. . .] nobody is more spiritual than anyone else [. . .] I’m just a guitar player and the music is the message. There’s no other message.”

I’ve been listening to McLaughlin for most of my life and still remember the shock of discovery when I heard T. H. Vinayakram’s opening morsing notes blending with McLaughlin’s guitar on “Mind Ecology,” the first cut on Shakti’s 1977 album *Natural Elements*. And earlier, like any young teen with a taste for unusual sounds, I had been floored by the Mahavishnu Orchestra’s powerful blend of melody, dissonance, fearless musical boundary-crossing, and spine-tingling explosions of energy and creative anarchy.

*Anything* seemed possible—and it’s an ineluctable feeling I’ve carried forward from those days. The interview that follows tries to get at the ways in which McLaughlin articulates musical and life principles that are inseparable—and how these have shaped a musical practice where the potential and the impossible fuse in the here and now of improvised sound.

Anything, it turns out, is *still, always* possible.

## Interview:

**Daniel Fischlin:** You recently made a substantial donation to the Palestinian association Al Mada for Arts-based Community Development and its [Music Therapy Centre](#). The money is to be used to help women with physical disabilities, youth-at-risk, and traumatized children through music. And I’m aware of your efforts to organize concerts with Zakir Hussain in Gaza to help raise further funds to support Palestinians struggling with poverty, oppression, and systematic state violence. For all the talk of “spirituality and metaphysics,” it seems to me that spirit is also about how you manifest your presence in the here and now. Would you comment on this, as well as on music’s power to heal, to transform, and to express solidarity in manifest ways that make a real difference in the world?

**John McLaughlin:** This donation was made spontaneously. As aware people, we see what is going on around us. We feel what certain events do to us, and we react accordingly. To quote the old hippy slogan, “If you’re not part of the solution, you’re part of the problem.” This is very relevant to me and my way of looking at the world.

The phrase “talk of spirituality and metaphysics” is precisely that: just talk. We are all spiritual beings, without exception. Once you have identified with the rest of humanity, your actions will follow.

Music is to me the most marvelous and wonderful power on Earth. I have seen first-hand the profound and beneficial effects music has had on people including myself. There is no such thing as “bad music.” There is only music that is more or less well played. We all know that music can penetrate into the deepest part of our being. At this level, music becomes magical. This is only to remind you that although all music is good, at a certain point, musicians have a responsibility to be worthy of the privilege of being a musician with the power that this entails.

Music is capable of transforming a person’s awareness in a moment, and, I believe, has been doing this since time immemorial. One example of the solidarity you mention is the reunification of Germany. In my opinion, rock music and the culture that grew around it since the 1950s was an essential element in this revolution in society. Music has always crossed borders easier than people, and its corresponding effect can be seen in this momentous event.

**Daniel Fischlin:** Again, please feel free to redirect or reshape the question to suit what you want to communicate—but I think this is an important issue and one that the ICASP project has been dealing with via work done using improvisation with differently-abled children, homeless people, and disenfranchised groups (especially new immigrants to Canada)—all involving music as a means to addressing very real social problems. Comment?

**John McLaughlin:** We are drifting out of the sphere of music in this paragraph. Homeless and disenfranchised peoples remind me of the quote by Vivekananda<sup>iv</sup>: How can people think about God when they are hungry? To speak about, or even play music to people who have no food or shelter is perhaps helpful in some small way, but the fundamental amenities of life are a necessity for all people. To speak about music, or about God for that matter, you need a full belly, clothes, and shelter. I am sure you are doing great things with the people you cite, and on condition they have these basics, then the music can really help in many situations.

**Daniel Fischlin:** I've often thought about musical improvisation and the unnamable as connected . . . a way of putting into sonic practice the most elusive and beautiful, challenging aspects of being ... There's a very strong sense over the course of your life in music that when you take to the stage there is a rich, integrated practice and holistic awareness/mindfulness of experiences and reflections that are not just musical. Could you reflect on music as a form of creativity that brings these relationships into being, literally performs them and gives them voice?

**John McLaughlin:** Improvisation is, simply put, being and living this very moment. No one can hide in music, and improvising in music is to be truly in this very moment and being completely yourself, with all your qualities and faults. It is probably the most honest state for a human being to be in, whether in music or life. The great thing about improvisation in general is that the listener is taken by the very spontaneity. This is our most natural state.

I don't feel qualified to speak about holistic awareness and other states of mind. To me, when we are completely spontaneous, we stop thinking and only act. This is the ideal state for any kind of creative work, whether musical or other. I don't really know about bringing relationships into being either, sorry . . . what I do know is that people who are in an environment of spontaneity express deeper aspects of their own being. For the most part we function on a discursive level of awareness. To act spontaneously leaves this state behind and allows the deeper aspects of our nature to flow naturally.

**Daniel Fischlin:** By the same token, you are often associated (as in Walter Kolosky's book about the Mahavishnu Orchestra—*Power, Passion and Beauty*, 2006—and especially in other musicians' comments) with musical collisions, angularity, radical explorations of dissonance. In your musical practice, what do you see as the traps around improvisation . . . the idealizations or truisms about improvisation that need constant rethinking through unexpected collisions and musical provocations?

**John McLaughlin:** I am convinced that to be honest with myself in music as in life will never lead me astray. Being honest with yourself in art can lead you to some strange places and discover surprises about yourself, even strange things. We are very mysterious beings in a constant state of discovery. I do feel that we must pursue these aspects of our being, since they are there for some reason or other, or perhaps for no reason at all. The only "trap" I see in improvisation in music is when restraints are abandoned. Without these restraints, which can be in the form of complex harmony or sophisticated rhythmic cycles, we can easily drift into self-indulgence.

I actually feel very strongly that perfect discipline equals perfect freedom. Of course, it is essential to forget everything you've learned once you start playing. This is no easy task and requires dedication and humility. In any event, the first lesson one learns when trying to improvise is that one is unbelievably inarticulate and incapable of saying anything of merit. This feeling can and does continue throughout life, incidentally. So humility is really the first lesson.

Basically: if you're playing, you're not thinking and if you're thinking, you're not playing.

**Daniel Fischlin:** Over the years, there's been a remarkable intensification of your improvisational language (to my ears). Ideas are more extended, phraseology is even more remarkably fluent and unpredictable, ideas transcend notes . . . But I'm also struck by how there's a continuity between earlier recordings like your work on *Bitches Brew* and more recently on *To The One* (with the 4th Dimension and its deeply-felt tribute to Coltrane's *A Love Supreme*) . . . How has improvising changed for you over time, and to what degree is this change the result of your unique history in experimenting with cross- or trans-cultural forms of music?

**John McLaughlin:** However I am at this moment of time is due directly to my past and my experiences in music and life. If there's one thing certain in life, it's that we change. You can see it in nature, and we're part of that: everything is evolving in some way or other. It's only natural that we change. Since this is so, it's inevitable that our work/art changes. Not only can it not be stopped, on the contrary, it should be encouraged. How I feel today is not quite like I felt yesterday. There is only a small change, but over a period of six months or six years, the change is considerable. However, as I mention above, what I do is founded on what I did, so it is inseparable from it. Even though we work

every day bringing our creative mind up to date with our imagination, we can only move with what we have at our disposal.

The imagination is an essential tool. It allows us to hear/see what is, in fact, unseeable and unhearable. The imagination can be stimulated by almost anything, and the musical imagination certainly by other cultures' music, and philosophy for that matter. Why I have been fascinated by jazz, blues, and rock in addition to the music and culture of India is a mystery to me. Only it is so. Of course, if you hear or feel common ground, which is the case with me, you gravitate towards it naturally. A similar movement happened in the early twentieth century when painters began absorbing and being greatly influenced by African art. It entered the mainstream of modern art. The same happened to me and many others.

In my case I felt that I should learn and know the rules of Indian music in order to play with these marvelous players. Over time, and it is now over forty years that I've been collaborating with my Indian colleagues, the influences become part of you, not even second nature, but an integral part of you. These influences have their own way of coming through your work, sometimes without being noticed. In the end, they all add to the palette of colors you use to create and play.

**Daniel Fischlin:** From your early work with Tony Williams, Miles Davis, through to the Mahavishnu Orchestra and Shakti, and then your ever-evolving work in any number of other circumstances, there's always been a profound respect for cultural difference, but also a profound opening into the creative discipline required to engage with musicians from other cultures. Can you speak to the importance of this musically, but also in a broader way as a generalized social practice?

**John McLaughlin:** If the situation were inverted and an Indian musician came to me to play together in a western environment and began playing a Raga and a rhythmic cycle that I didn't know, it would be a bit strange. I feel it incumbent, therefore, that if I wish to play with these players, only out of respect, I should know their music and traditions. This is only the beginning, for how am I supposed to get any true empathy and deep interaction—in short, satisfaction—if I don't really know how to play with them? In social terms, I would compare it to learning more languages. Only through language or music can we enter into the mind and heart of a foreigner and consequently identify with them, their culture and traditions.

**Daniel Fischlin:** I'm interested in how you might look back on your experiences as a British musician loosely associated with the British 60s free improv. scene—Tony Oxley, for example, was on your first solo record, *Extrapolation*, if I'm not mistaken. What do you think of that scene now, post Derek Bailey? Has the culture around improvisation changed to your mind? I'm especially thinking of comments made by Bailey about improvisation as a core human necessity, ubiquitous but marginalized by mainstream producers of cultural content—and I'm thinking of a comment recently made at the Guelph Jazz Festival colloquium by AACM member and founder Muhal Richard Abrams, who emphatically stated that "improvisation is a human right."

**John McLaughlin:** When I look back on my experiences in the UK around the 1960s, I am very grateful that I had those experiences—even the disagreeable ones. Don't forget that I had quite a number of different jobs just keeping body and soul together. The 1960s was a fantastic decade—one of the most creative—and I'm really happy that I was there to witness all that fantastic music being born: whether from Coltrane, Miles, the Beatles, James Brown, Cecil Taylor, Sly and the Family Stone, and Jimi Hendrix, to name just a few.

Regarding the comments by Derek Bailey and Muhal Richard Abrams on improvisation, I don't see it at all like them. To me, improvisation is neither a right nor a necessity—it is our natural state of being. It is the way of acting without thinking. This applies equally to music and life.

**Daniel Fischlin:** Did you and the other members of Shakti see what you were doing as a fusion of styles and cultures? How much discussion went on about what it meant to share music across cultures and musical practices? How much did you study/emulate Indian classical music in order to make the band work versus how much did the Indian musicians have to play outside of their traditions? How was that negotiated, if at all? I know the music speaks for itself and always will, and am interested in the social and philosophical contexts that helped shape the music, if at all.

**John McLaughlin:** I'm sorry to tell you that there were no social contexts, but perhaps some vague philosophical context that helped shape the music of Shakti. Before the birth of Shakti, I had become increasingly fascinated by the common ground shared by the Indian and jazz traditions. These two traditions were fused in the beginning by Miles

Davis and then to a greater degree by Coltrane. By the end of the 1950s, Miles had conceived the modal jazz form, which was a revolution itself. Briefly, this concept involved the increasing use of the western modes in a simple harmonic background. Indian music could be considered a relative of modal jazz, although much more sophisticated both in linear, and rhythmic terms.

On discovering Indian music, I became aware of the stupendous talents in improvisation that lived and worked in Indian music. Since I'd grown up bathing in the music of Miles and Coltrane, and particularly since I'd discovered the "spiritual" dimension in Indian music, it was inevitable that I be drawn to this music.

Don't forget that Coltrane, in one recording, "A Love Supreme," integrated the spiritual dimension into jazz music. This was a new jazz that was itself drawing upon the traditions of India. I just went one step further by studying with Dr. Ramanathan at Wesleyan, and later with Pandit Ravi Shankar privately. I would remind you that it is no coincidence that Coltrane's son is named Ravi. I had met Zakir Hussain in 1969, became friends, and subsequently [met] violinist L. Shankar, who was the nephew of Dr. Ramanathan's percussionist Ramnad Raghavan, who appeared in the first edition of Shakti. There was such joy in playing together (a joy that exists to this day) that the writing was on the wall for the end of Mahavishnu and the birth of Shakti.

**Daniel Fischlin:** Discipline, musically and spiritually, are cornerstones of your creative life practice in music. Can you reflect on how discipline, spirit, and improvisation interconnect for you?

**John McLaughlin:** I don't separate spirit from existence. It can only be separated intellectually. When you improvise, what are you saying/singing? You sing about your life and your relationships with the beings around you, the Earth and the cosmos itself—the all. To say or sing anything, you need to have an idea at least of who you are and what existence is all about. Then you can begin to say what it all means to you through the music.

To really improvise means you must be free. Free from the restrictions playing an instrument places on you, free from your own knowledge, and then just be. However, in order to be free in music, you need to have learned a great deal of music theory [and] forgotten it all—to see clearly and to feel deeply. In moments of true inspiration, you will merge with the music and the music will become you. Here, you will be totally free and able to simply BE MUSIC. This is a wonderful place to be, and in fact people know exactly what this state is since it really is what they are waiting for in a concert.

**Daniel Fischlin:** I've used the term "transcultural" to describe all the musical border-crossing you've done in your life. The commitment and respect you've shown to other styles of music anticipated "world music," paved the way for thinking across musical and cultural divides (like few musicians of your stature before you), and imagined vast and compelling ways of engaging musically with each other across cultures. Can you reflect on what being transcultural in music means . . . especially for younger musicians whose sense of this may be more defined by the current business of world music than perhaps by the underlying ethics of being with others in difference that your practice (to me) represents.

**John McLaughlin:** There are so many wonderful and marvelous musicians/singers on this planet; for a musician not to know them seems to me to be such a shame. In this day and age, where we live in a real global village in terms of communication—sharing of culture, whether music, poetry or art—we are all global citizens. This beautiful and now somewhat fragile planet is our only home—humanity's. It is clear that we will be forced one way or another to take care of each other in order for the race to survive. Instead of waiting, I believe we should be taking care of this now.

This question is quite relevant to your first question. That said, there is a qualitative difference in the world of the 1960s and the twenty-first century. Before, it was easy to find employment. Today, even with the Baccalauréat, you can wait a long time before getting employment. The music world is suffering the same disorder. Many musicians are suffering from lack of support—and simply lack of money. As a result, the temptation to move into the commercial field becomes more attractive, and the ethics less worrisome.

**Daniel Fischlin:** I was thinking of Miles Davis sitting in with Charlie Parker as a young 19/20-year old on those historic recordings from the mid-1940s, and of the parallel life-changing journey you made to New York as a young man to play with Tony Williams and Miles. As part of thinking these questions through, I re-listened to the complete Bitches Brew sessions and was yet again struck by how revolutionary the music was and is (there are elements of Indian music, of fusion, of free playing sustained by remarkable extended forms, along with of course so called cool jazz and blues) . . . you were already crossing cultural, musical, and other borders in ways you've continued to do since . . . What did those early experiences teach you about musical border crossings? How would you situate

improvisation as a tool for shaping new forms in this cross-cultural context? Is it fair to use a term like community in describing what happens when improvisational practices open up new creative spaces across cultures?

**John McLaughlin:** In the end, everything is improvisation. Even the greatest classical works began as improvisations and then become written down and crystallized. Is there anything in this world that doesn't begin as an improvisation? When we meet someone, we improvise, they improvise. Whether it is cross-cultural or mono-cultural, we are all improvising constantly. This is the way of consciousness.

**Daniel Fischlin:** One of the things that's key to the Improvisation, Community, and Social Practice research project is the importance of improvisation in exploring and defining community (even when that involves dissonance and tension—no idealized sense here of community). Musical improvisation was also a key aspect of Black culture's creative response to oppression, segregation, and white supremacy . . . How do you situate your understanding of improvisation as a musical practice within a wider set of social implications (if indeed you think these exist)? Is music pure of (or removed from) these social contexts?

**John McLaughlin:** I'm not sure what you mean precisely by exploring and defining community. Communities seem to me to define themselves according to the innate tendencies of the people who constitute the community, and of course the exterior pressures placed on the community by the economic and cultural criteria surrounding them. I'm not sure in which context you are placing improvisation into this situation.

**Daniel Fischlin:** There's a widely cited comment you made about improvisation that reads as follows:

To really improvise, to say something you feel at this moment, is the most difficult thing in the world. If you play what you know, then it's not real. To truly improvise requires you not to know anything, in a sense. It's a very difficult and obtuse point. You want to have your knowledge available to you, but the most beautiful thing is to play something for the first time in your life. In this state of mind you see everything before you, every possibility, and you feel you have the ability to move down any avenue you wish—all are suddenly open to you. Music opens the avenues, places you've never been. That can happen in your imagination, but when it occurs in music it's wonderful, because it happens not only inside, but outside at the same moment. It's magic. ("TOUR 1980")

Can you reflect on this thought that brings together the material reality of music with the inner spiritual reality that illuminates the sound in being? I'm especially interested in love, devotion, and surrender as key components of being in an improvisation, of improvising in being . . . transcending presence and memory but also heightening these in the moment of forgetting and unknowing. Is spirit an improvisation? Is improvisation spirit? How free is free improvisation? How might you modulate what you say in the quote above given the musical journey you've been on since you made this comment?

**John McLaughlin:** Several questions wrapped up into one . . . Firstly, I don't think I can comment on my own quotation. It was spontaneously said (improvised), and it stands on its own. *Love, Devotion and Surrender*, in addition to being the title of a recording made by Carlos Santana and me, are signposts on the way to perfect enlightenment. Love and devotion are easier to understand than surrender, since in the Western world the word "surrender" has connotations of weakness and giving up hope: "The soldiers surrendered!"

The final step to enlightenment is surrender. We are not here for a discussion of enlightenment, but briefly it means surrendering the ego and self-will to the Infinite. I cannot consider these aspects as "components of being in an improvisation," to quote you, but the emancipation that total surrender gives means you are free. Once you are free, you can only be spontaneous, and as a consequence, you are improvising continuously. In this context, the question "how free is improvisation?" is self-explanatory. The comment you cite from me is as valid now as it was when I said it.

**Daniel Fischlin:** What are your thoughts on the various approaches out there to instant composition/creative musicking/free playing (as exemplified in say the Instant Composers' Pool [ICP] in Holland, or the Association for the Advancement of Creative Musicians [AACM] in Chicago, or people like William Parker and Hamid Drake)? What do you see as the future of improvised music across the many genres you've played in—especially in terms of the market pressures that seem to be so at odds with the spirit in which creative improvisation happens?

**John McLaughlin:** Unfortunately, I don't know the people you mention. I have already spoken about what improvisation means to me earlier in this interview, so it must be quite clear to you that my personal view of

improvisation is indivisible from internal discipline and exterior restraints. Whenever these aspects are present, I believe there will be good improvisation. You have also mentioned the word “trap,” and it is sometimes relevant in improvised music when self-indulgence enters.

**Daniel Fischlin:** Are there identifiable elements of technique and improvisation that catalyze a collective spiritual dialogue and bridge various cultural divides?

**John McLaughlin:** There is only one important element in bridging cultures—Love. If you truly love a particular culture, and you are prepared to work in order to understand the discipline in that culture, love will find a way for you to enter it fully.

**Daniel Fischlin:** The relation between spiritual energy and sound is something you’ve explored all your life. Intimacy and public practice, ephemeral presence and deep-rooted truths come together in musical performances that give voice to that connection. Would you reflect on this relationship and especially on the connections among improvisation, musical voice, and spirit? I’m especially thinking (for some reason) of a koan-like question from Stephen Mitchell’s *The Second Book of the Tao*: “I just said something. But did what I just said really / say anything, or not?”

**John McLaughlin:** I think I’ve really covered this earlier. As far as your quote from Stephen Mitchell, if it means something to himself and others, yes; if not, no.

**Daniel Fischlin:** Why improvise?

**John McLaughlin:** You know the answer to this question.

**Daniel Fischlin:** The great veena player Sundaram Balachander was a master of South Indian Carnatic music, but also had a deep understanding of Hindustani classical music. I can’t help but hear in your own playing echoes of Balachander’s playing, but also of his syncretic knowledge of North and South Indian musics that came together in Shakti. Can you talk about your relationship to Balachander and situate your own improvisational instincts and training in relation to his work?

**John McLaughlin:** I’ve loved Balachander for over 40 years. He has had a wonderful influence on me. So many people have affected me in so many different ways, that I’ll never be able to pay back my debts. In terms of improvisation, his influence was directly related to his marvelous rhythmic sense, and in *Alapana* also. However, I am a Western musician and improvise through a Western discipline, in spite of my years of Indian music studies.

**Daniel Fischlin:** Your most recent recording, *To The One*, cites Coltrane’s influence—and I can’t help but think of Coltrane’s own explorations of Indian music in the 60s and of Miles Davis’s experimentations with Indian music in *Bitches Brew*. Can you talk about how you came to the study of Indian music and how Coltrane and Davis influenced (if at all) your approach to intercultural sonic explorations?

**John McLaughlin:** I believe I covered this question earlier. But I would add briefly that once you are under the influence of someone, the influence continues and evolves along with the person who is influencing you. So for example, the influence of Coltrane in 1959 continued through till the end of his life, even though the musical influences were sometimes dramatically different.

**Daniel Fischlin:** Coltrane said in an interview that music “does express just what is happening,” and he added that it expressed the “whole of human experience” (Nisenson 179). I may be wrong, but he was linking the spiritual, transcendent aspects of music with its real, material realities, like the struggle for civil rights and so forth. How do you think of the relationship among music, spirit, and daily reality (political, economic, and so forth)?

**John McLaughlin:** Again, we can consider things and events separately, but we should remember that in reality everything is connected. For example, any kind of world without music is inconceivable.

I would go further to say that without the transcendental side of humanity, humanity would not exist. In this sense, music will and does have far-reaching effects on humanity. Even the politicians.

**Daniel Fischlin:** Sharan Rani, the great female sarod virtuoso and improviser, said, “There is only one ambition of my life and that is to remain totally immersed in music and to reach that point where through my music I can feel one with the divine.” Your own relationship to music seems to be very much aligned with such a comment. What does achieving this kind of immersion tell us about the importance of music? Why do virtuosity, improvisation, and the divine seem to be so interlinked?

**John McLaughlin:** Music is one way of emancipation, spiritual freedom, enlightenment, being saved—call it what you will. Your question “Why” does not belong to the transcendental world. One cannot ask “Why Art”?

The transcendental world to which Sharan Rani aspires is the answer to all questions without exception. We are all on the path to transcendence in some way or other. It’s really just a matter of time.

## Notes

<sup>i</sup> I thank John McLaughlin and his wife Ina for their generosity and courtesy in facilitating this interview at an incredibly busy time in their lives. Thanks, too, to Lewis Melville and Rob Wallace for their thoughtful insights in developing the questions for this interview.

<sup>ii</sup> Recall Davis’s use of sitarist Khalil Balakrishna and tambura and tabla player Bihari Sharma, both of whom can be heard on *The Complete Bitches Brew Sessions*, 2004.

<sup>iii</sup> Self-realized master whose complete surrender is a measure of his spiritual liberation.

<sup>iv</sup> Swami Vivekananda is well known for his critique of poverty and human misery, reminding his followers that the illiterate, the poor, and the ignorant are “blood brothers” with all other human beings. As the principal disciple of nineteenth century mystic Sri Ramakrishna Paramahansa, Vivekananda founded the Ramakrishna Mission in 1897 and played a major part in the introduction of Hindu philosophies of Vedanta and Yoga to both Europe and America. Vivekananda also raised interfaith awareness and helped Hinduism achieve the status of a world religion at the end of the nineteenth century. Vivekananda argues that “The goal of mankind is knowledge [. . .] Now this knowledge is inherent in man. No knowledge comes from outside: it is all inside. What we say a man ‘knows’, should, in strict psychological language, be what he ‘discovers’ or ‘unveils’; what man ‘learns’ is really what he discovers by taking the cover off his own soul, which is a mine of infinite knowledge” (Sen 198).

## Works Cited

Beck, Jeff. Interview. *Uncut*. IPC Media, March 2010. Web. 17 Feb. 2011.

McLaughlin, John. Interview by Riz Khan. “One on One.” *Al Jazeera*, December 2010. Web. 17 Feb. 2011.

---. “To The One,” performed by John McLaughlin and The 4th Dimension on *To the One*, Abstract Logix, 2010. CD.

McLaughlin, John, Al Di Meola, and Paco de Lucia. “TOUR 1980: ‘A Victory for the Acoustic Guitar.’” Interview by Tom Wheeler. Reprinted from *Guitar Player* (March 1981). Web. 17 Feb. 2011.

Metheny, Pat. “John McLaughlin.” *PatMethenyInteract*, n.d. Web. 17 Feb. 2011.

Nisenson, Eric. *Ascension: John Coltrane and His Quest*. New York: Da Capo, 1995. Print.

Rani, Sharan. *Sharan Rani—The Divine Sarod Player*. Film. Rajshri Media, n.d. Web. 17 Feb. 2011.

Sen, Amiya P. *The Indispensable Vivekananda: Anthology For Our Times*. Delhi: Permanent Black, 2006. Print.