Artists

The Ever-Mounting Flame

John McLaughlin Still Burns Brightly at 70

By Adam Levy

It’s nearly impossible to think of jazz-rock fusion without an electric guitarist in the mix. The genre itself—which began in the late 1960s—seems built around the sound of the instrument, with early players striving to bridge the gap between John Coltrane’s wailing avant-jazz saxophone and Jimi Hendrix’s blistering high-gain blues guitar. Larry Coryell, Bill Connors, and Al Di Meola were among the first-generation fusion pioneers in the early 1970s—Coryell with his Eleventh House group, and Connors and Di Meola each with the band Return to Forever. Countless players have continued to mine the fertile territory where jazz and rock intersect in the years since, but before any of these guys staked his claim, one guitarist was there first, appearing on two of the earliest and most influential fusion recordings of all time—The Tony Williams Lifetime’s Emergency! and Miles Davis’ In a Silent Way.

British-born John McLaughlin began playing professionally in the UK in the early 1960s, with
amped-up R&B groups led by Georgie Fame and Graham Bond. (Bond’s band also featured drummer Ginger Baker and bassist Jack Bruce, who would later become two-thirds of Cream.) McLaughlin was already well versed in blues, jazz, and rock by then, and had dabbled in flamenco. But it wasn’t until he moved to New York in January of 1969 that fate would grab him by the collar and change his life—as well as the course of jazz for years to come. Legendary trumpeter Miles Davis was heading in a newly electrified direction at the time. McLaughlin had already been playing with drummer Tony Williams—a longstanding member of Davis’ band—and Williams recommended McLaughlin to Davis. In the young guitarist, Davis saw a player who had serious jazz chops yet was just as comfortable in the funk- and rock-inspired grooves at the core of his new sound. Davis hired McLaughlin to play on his In a Silent Way recording, and the guitarist was a prime mover on his next few recordings as well. The trumpeter even named a song for McLaughlin on his Bitches Brew album. The 70s were a musically fertile period for McLaughlin, as he began making his own records—including Devotion (with former Hendrix sideman, Buddy Miles), The Inner Mounting Flame and Birds of Fire (with his jazz-fusion group, the Mahavishnu Orchestra), the all-acoustic My Goal’s Beyond, Love Devotion Surrender (with Carlos Santana), and three albums of Indian-inspired acoustic fusion (with his group Shakti). McLaughlin’s hot streak continued throughout the 80s and 90s, as he recorded a wide variety of guitar-centric music with multinational ensembles and fellow pickers—including the phenomenal flamenco guitarist Paco de Lucia. Along the way, McLaughlin searched for new sounds on the instrument and was one of the first players to embrace the guitar synthesizer, including using a Synclavier system extensively on his 1984 album Mahavishnu.

McLaughlin’s horizons have further expanded in recent years. He composed and recorded a score for a ballet, released two instructional DVDs—This Is the Way I Do It and The Gateway to Rhythm—toured and recorded with the Five Peace Band (co-led by keyboardist Chick Corea, a fellow Miles Davis alum), and released several albums under his own name.

Now Here This [Abstract Logic] is McLaughlin’s latest release, and it features his 4th Dimension band with drummer Ranjit Barot, bassist Etienne Mbappe, and keyboard/drummer Gary Husband. The guitarist’s playing on this album sounds fresh and dynamic amid odd-tempo blues (“Echoes From Then”), lush harmonies (“Guitar Love”), and break-neck fusion jams (“Riff Raff” and “Call and Answer”). And he’s still using state-of-the-art guitar-synth technology here and there (“Wonderfall”). Listening to the unadulterated passion and fire on Now Here This, it’s kind of hard to believe that this is the work of a 70-year-old man, but then McLaughlin isn’t a man who has ever taken the easy road. He’s been pushing, reaching, and burning from the get-go, and this record is what a lifetime of putting that kind of energy into music sounds like.
Your quartet on Now Here This is so simpatico, sometimes it’s hard to tell where the compositions end and the improvisation begins.

There’s something very profound and magical that can happen when people play together. That’s what I love about jazz. It’s spontaneous. Without the spontaneity, without the improvisation, where’s jazz? There isn’t any. That’s why I’m not too happy about some of this “smooth jazz.” It’s full of clichés. Where’s the blood, man?

What was the genesis of Now Here This? When did you start writing these tunes?

For as long as I can remember—and that’s a long time—I’ve never had an intention of making a record. Maybe some people do, but it doesn’t work like that with me. Basically, music comes. When there’s enough of it, then I’m ready to record. The music itself determines what it’s destined for. For example, I’ve recently written—in addition to the music for this recording—a couple of pieces for Shakti, another piece for Paco de Lucia and myself, and I’ve written a piece for violin and sound-design. So I don’t really have any dictat about what’s going to come.

The genesis of this record was like the genesis of every record I’ve ever made. I live my life and do what I do. Music arrives in my mind. I write it down and try to get out of the way—try not to contaminate it.

“Contaminate” it?

When music arrives in my mind, I really try to keep its integrity. If I start messing with it, I kind of contaminate it. I know that sounds weird, but that’s the way I feel about it. As I’m getting older—and hopefully a little wiser—I’m finding out how to leave it alone.

How do you go about leaving it alone?

Just do it! [Laughs.] You do it by practicing it. We have a tendency to tweek, so I just write it down. My wife gave me a little book with music lines in it. She got tired of giving me napkins in restaurants so I could note down little musical phrases. I was hearing while we were out having lunch with friends. There’s no hard and fast rule about when the music comes. I could be in the shower. Sometimes I hear things when I’m waking up in the morning, or when I’m going to sleep at night, or walking down the street. You never know. The thing is to be able to write it down.

Now I’ve got an iPhone like the rest of the world, and I sing into it. It’s very practical, because you’re in the spur of the moment and you don’t lose it. The fact that it’s on the iPhone is cool because you have your phone with you basically all the time. Zap—you’re in.

So you never sit down with guitar in hand and decide, “I’m going to write a tune today?”

Never.

Wow.

I know. Weird—huh?

In your press release for Now Here This, you say this record is a culmination of your life’s work until now.

Everything is, really. Every record I do, I put everything into it. The minute you start creating something, you’re putting your life story into what you’re doing. Whether it’s a two-dimensional painting, or an album, it will reflect your life and the relationships you enjoy with the people around you, and ultimately the universe—or God, for want of another word. Whatever we do will be imbued with who we are, what we are. That’s what I want when I put a record on. I want to hear that person. Who is this person? I want to feel their life. I want the same thing when I go to a concert. In a way, I want them to take me over. I want to forget myself and go into their life, through the music.

I cannot be one way in life and another way in music. It doesn’t work like that. I’m just me, but I’m very happy to be me—and not just to be a musician. The whole point of me being alive is to be completely myself—and if I’m completely myself in music, then so much the better.

On the influences page on your website, you mention a wide variety of things that influenced you—from classical music to the blues. Can you talk about your first exposure to the blues?

My mother was an amateur violinist, so there was classical music being played in the house all the time—on the radio or on the record player. A guitar arrived in our house when I was 11, and that coincided with the moment I was exposed to blues players. It was so outrageously to hear this music. I’d just discovered the guitar and fallen in love with the instrument, and then I’m hearing people like Muddy Waters. We’re talking the mid ’50s here, when he was still playing slide acoustic guitar with Little Walter, the harmonica player. Then I heard Big Bill Broonzy and Lead Belly. It was a complete revelation for me.

How did you happen to hear all of this great music?

I heard it through my older brothers. I’m the youngest of five kids—three brothers and one sister. Two of the brothers were at university. When the blues boom hit the UK in the early 1950s, they were the ones that brought this music to the house—God bless ‘em. They also brought flamenco music and I became such a fan. I was 14 at the time. After the blues and flamenco, I heard Django Reinhardt—that was amazing. And then it was Miles Davis. I was 15 years old, hearing Miles and John Coltrane and that gang. That was the beginning and end.

Were you studying the music that inspired you, or did you just listen intently and try to absorb it that way?

There were no transcriptions in those days. Later, in the late ’60s and ’70s, I did a lot of analysis. I would analyze Coltrane’s work and Miles’ work. By the early ’70s, there were transcriptions coming out, or I would try to transcribe from the records myself. That’s very good work, because it really trains your ear.

It’s really important to be able to analyze. I did an educational DVD about eight years ago, called This Is the Way I Do It. It’s about improvisation. One of the reasons it took 18 months to videotape and assemble it is that I wanted a musical score for everything I was playing on the guitar, which has never been done before. It was a tough nut to crack, but we did it in the end. On the DVD, there’s a musical score at the bottom of the screen for everything that I’m doing. In each lesson, I’m improvising over a given chord sequence. You see the score as I’m improvising. Later, I project the score of the improvisation on a big screen and I go through it. I play back the tape and say, “You hear that? See what I’m doing here—relative to this scale, or this chord, relative to this rhythm?” I go through everything that I play and analyze it for the viewer. It’s a very important aspect of being a musician to see and understand intellectually what musician A, B, C, D, E, and F are actually doing.
When you talk about your influences, you mention Miles and Coltrane, but it's interesting that you don't mention other guitar players.

Listen, there's a piece on the new album called "Guitar Love." That's 'cause I love guitar. From the first day that the guitar arrived in my house, she went to bed with me. It was just a $4 guitar, but I was in love. And I still am today, almost 60 years later.

It's strange that you bring this up, but it's also true. Don't forget, I was already reading music and playing piano music by the time the guitar came. I got swept away by blues-playing and flamenco playing. Then I said, "I've got to listen to some classical guitar." And you know what? I didn't care for it, because there wasn't the repertory. I much preferred to hear the flamenco players. At the risk of being criticized, I would even say the flamenco technique is superior to the classical guitar technique. I know that may raise some hackles, but it's true—it's true to me.

Of course, there are exceptions, like Julian Bream, the British guitarist. He made a record in the '60s called 20th Century Guitar. This is one of the all-time greatest guitar records. He kills—it's so beautiful. But there are very few records like this. There's one recording of Rodrigo's "Concierto de Aranjuez" with Narciso Yepes playing guitar. It's the only one I ever enjoyed—other than when Paco played it.

What about jazz guitarists?

There were a couple of them that I liked—particularly Tal Farlow in his very early days. He had a lovely flow with his playing. The thing is, by the time the mid '60s came, the times they were a-changin', as Bob Dylan would say. We were changing too. By '65, everybody's dropping acid, and I'm listening to Coltrane's A Love Supreme, and this huge spiritual movement happened. Not just in the UK but in the States, too. The Beatles were part of it, I was part of it, the Beach Boys were part of it. Coltrane, of course, brought in this spiritual dimension with one recording. What an achievement! And he was playing the saxophone almost with distortion. Not distortion, but breaking the notes into two notes—three notes sometimes.

By 1964 or '65, I got myself a big amp, wanted some feedback, man. I didn't want to hear this sweet little jazz guitar anymore. Don't get me wrong. I love bebop. I grew up playing.
though it up. We wanted jazz with an edge. We wanted some blood onstage.

**How did you come to play with Miles Davis?**

I arrived in New York in January ’69, and Miles was already moving out of that whole fantastic decade when he had made so much beautiful music. The quintet that he had with Wayne Shorter on saxophone—it was quintessential jazz. Then, all of a sudden, he was listening to Sly and the Family Stone and James Brown, like me! I was playing in R&B and funk bands. I loved James Brown. He was another revelation.

When Miles wanted a guitarist, I just happened to be in the right place at the right time. I had the R&B and the funk thing, and that’s what he wanted to hear. The first recording I did with him was “In a Silent Way” for the *In a Silent Way* album. That was a lovely tune by pianist Joe Zawinul. Miles didn’t like it as it was, so he had me change its musical direction. Nobody knew there was going to be a guitar player on the session that day, so I had a copy of Zawinul’s part. When Miles asked me to play it alone on the guitar, I said, “This is a piano part.” He could see that I was just sweating. He wanted me to play the piano part and that was a little hard for the guitar. Then he said, “Play it like you don’t know how to play the guitar.” That’s why I threw all the chords out and just played the melody in E. Everybody knows E.

The tune, the way that Joe wrote it, is really beautiful too. It’s just that Miles didn’t like it. He wanted it to go a different way and he had me do it. I didn’t realize until afterward, what he’d actually done. But he was like that—and he continued to be like that for all of the years I knew him, until he passed. What a brilliant man. There’s nobody like him around.

Do you think of yourself primarily as an electric guitarist, or an acoustic guitarist?

I think more electric, but there are periods where I play acoustic exclusively, because I love it so much. Don’t forget, that’s the guitar that I first fell in love with—the acoustic.

What was that first guitar? Did it have a brand name?

**Acme**—like what Wile E. Coyote would’ve played. It was a piece of rubbish, but I didn’t care. It had six strings, it vibrated against my body, and I loved it.

So the electric guitar came later?

By the time I was 16, I was in a band trying to play jazz with an electric guitar. The way the electric guitar sounds, I’ve gotta have some distortion—gotta have it. That goes all the way back to the ’60s, when I played in Graham Bond’s band with Jack Bruce and Ginger Baker, and then continuing into the Tony Williams Lifetime.

Also with the Mahavishnu Orchestra.

Talk about loud and distorted! That was a little excessive, I must admit. But even today, I don’t like to hear a clean electric guitar. I want to hear some extra notes in there. This is what tube distortion can do. Acoustic guitar has to be clean, beautiful. There’s something antique about acoustic guitar, but the electric guitar is the instrument of the 20th Century—and the 21st Century.