JOHN MCLAUGHLIN

At 70, the guitar virtuoso still revels in his dynamic musical journey
By Jeff Tamarkin

JOHN MCLAUGHLIN REMEMBERS SOME ODD ADVICE HE once received from Miles Davis—cryptic words at the time, but later made perfect sense. It was 1969, and the young guitar master was working in the studio with the jazz titan when “Miles made this Zen statement, recalls McLaughlin. “He told me, ‘Play like you don’t know how to play guitar!’” Davis wanted McLaughlin to lose his mind and approach the music without preconceptions.

More than four decades later, McLaughlin, 70, still takes that counsel to heart, and it’s evident on his newest release, Now Here This, which offers some of the most intense music of his career. It’s the second with McLaughlin’s 4th Dimension band—saxophonist Gary Hunter, bassist Eumir Deodato, drummer Ranjit Barot—recalling the electricity of his groundbreaking ‘70s jazz fusion group, the Mahavishnu Orchestra. On pioneering albums such as The Inner Mounting Flame, Mahavishnu combined the complexity of jazz and the muscle of rock. McLaughlin had already made waves by then, playing with jazz drummer Tony Williams, and working further with Davis on the landmark Bitches Brew, which included a track that not only featured the guitarist but bore his name. McLaughlin has remained an active musical seeker-sinus, and has collaborated with a wide range of musicians ranging from Carlos Santana to tabla maestro Zakir Hussain, with whom he co-led the acoustic, Indian-influenced group Shakti in the ‘70s and ‘90s.

Now Here This finds John McLaughlin in a decidedly electric–fused frame of mind, though he never knows where he’ll head next—not only that he has no intention of slowing down. Says McLaughlin, who lives in the south of France, “When the music stops coming, I’ll stop, but at the moment I’m very happy.”

Is there a theme guiding the album? Not at all. The music just came. But each piece has an anecdote behind it. The opening piece, “Trancefusion,” is from my old hippie days, my trance days. Even today, when I meditate, I go into another state of consciousness that some would call a trance. Trance is not a bad word, and fusion is a label that’s been put on me for the last 40 years. But I like the real word, trance. It’s a healthy word. When you put fresh blood into someone, you make them feel better.

What was your recording process? Live in the studio. What can replace that thing that happens when you play together? When we go onstage we’re talking about the relationships we enjoy with each other, and the music and our instruments and even the world at large. Half of that comes through when you start to play with people.

What do you prefer to self-produce? I know what I want. It’s not difficult to produce an album. If you don’t have a clear idea of what you want, it’s good to bounce ideas off of somebody. But as soon as we started playing the new music I was clear on how it should be.

Do you write everything before heading to the studio? It was basically set up, except for the solos. I try to provoke them, because I need provocation, too. That’s why you have to play together. You don’t want to play what we’ve already played. The whole point of improvisation is to get to this new kind of collective consciousness. And purely for affection, I have a white Strat from my old hippie days, my trance days. Even today, when I meditate, I go into another state of consciousness that some would call a trance. Trance is not a bad word, and fusion is a label that’s been put on me for the last 40 years. But I like the real word, trance. It’s a healthy word. When you put fresh blood into someone, you make them feel better.

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Describe Mahavishnu’s early days. What amazed me was the degree of popularity we had very quickly. I knew the band was killing. It was beautiful—the experience we were all having was amazing. And fortunately we happened to be three at a time when people were receptive to it. But the popularity was a blessing and a curse, one of the elements that led to the dissolution of the group—too much pressure, too quickly.

When did you get into Indian music? It was basically set up, except for the solos. I try to provoke them, because I need provocation, too. That’s why you have to play together. You don’t want to play what we’ve already played. The whole point of improvisation is to get to this new kind of collective consciousness. And purely for affection, I have a white Strat from my old hippie days, my trance days. Even today, when I meditate, I go into another state of consciousness that some would call a trance. Trance is not a bad word, and fusion is a label that’s been put on me for the last 40 years. But I like the real word, trance. It’s a healthy word. When you put fresh blood into someone, you make them feel better.

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time, I had the second version of Mahavishnu with Jean-Luc Ponty in the band, and I was also jamming with this young teacher from Wesleyan University named L. Shankar. He was from South India, and Zakir was from North India. We started playing small concerts in churches and schools. At the same time I was doing the big shows with Mahavishnu. But by the end of '75, all I wanted to do was play acoustically. I got a lot of flak, but as long as you're ready to assume the consequences, it's OK.

How did you meet Carlos Santana?

He became a disciple of my guru, Sri Chinmoy. The collaboration we made, Love Devotion Surrender, came out of a dream I had. I called Clive Davis, who was then the head of Columbia Records, and said, "I had this nice dream about Carlos and I playing together," and he said, "Well, let's do it!" So we did. We did a 40th anniversary reunion concert last year in Montreux, Switzerland. I'm hoping we can do it again.

How do you keep your chops at 70?

Inside I'm still 29! I've never felt better. It's peculiar because it's a physical thing, playing guitar, and this machine's getting old. But I do a lot of yoga and sports—it's the only way to have a life at my age. You have to be healthy. We're not athletes, but there is definitely physical effort involved. I've got a few years left.

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McLaughlin bears no ill will toward the band's former members, though he admits, "It ended acrimoniously—stupidly, really. Don't get me wrong, I love that band, and retrospectively, I see why many people were so attached to them, and still are. But if we were to go back on the road, would it be for the right musical reasons? I know Chick Corea re-formed Return to Forever recently—and I love him so, he's a very dear friend—but that's not something I want to do. Mahavishnu had so much positive energy, such a great vibe and spirit, I want to remember it like that."

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