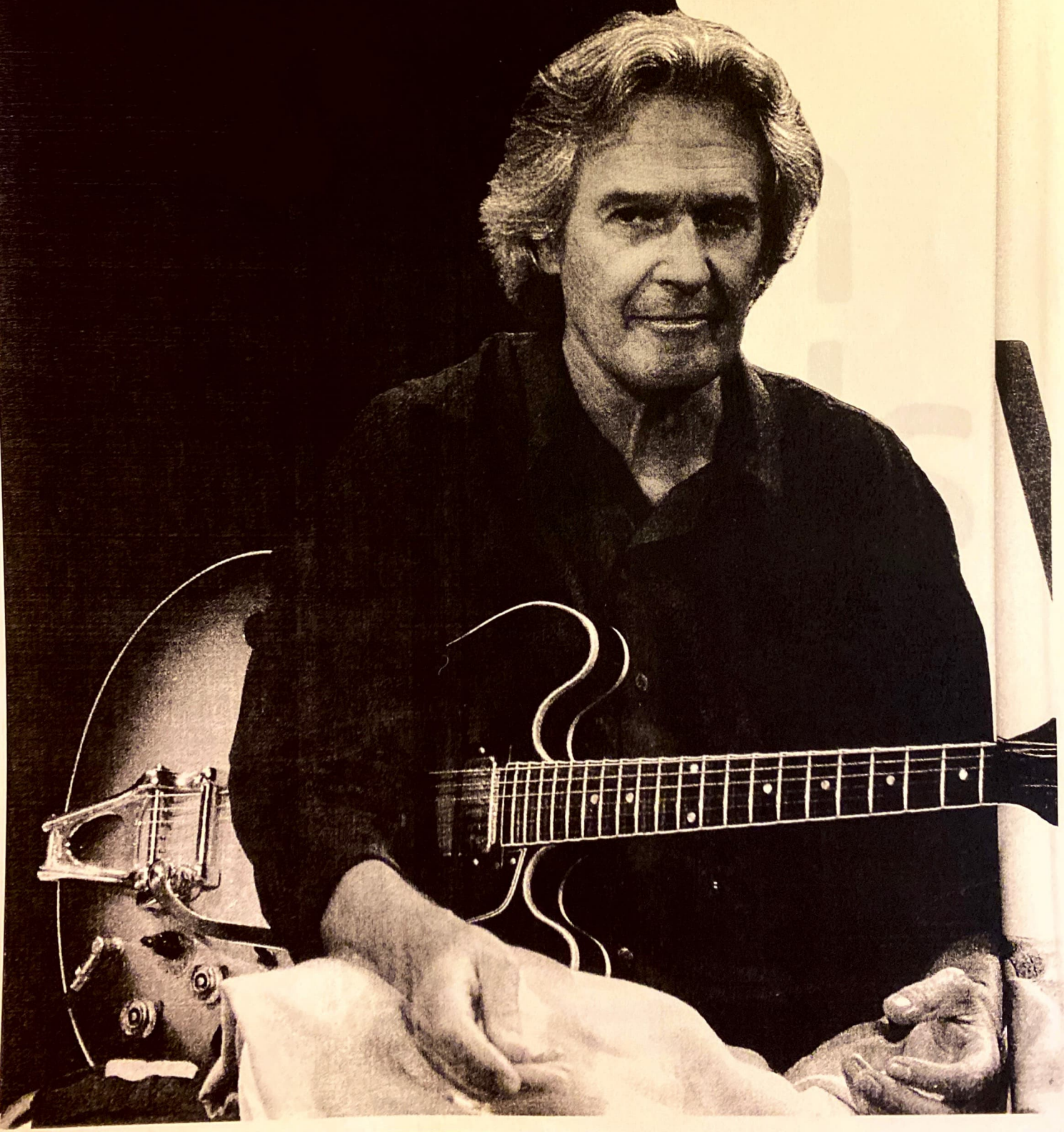


# John McLaughlin Unveils His 'M



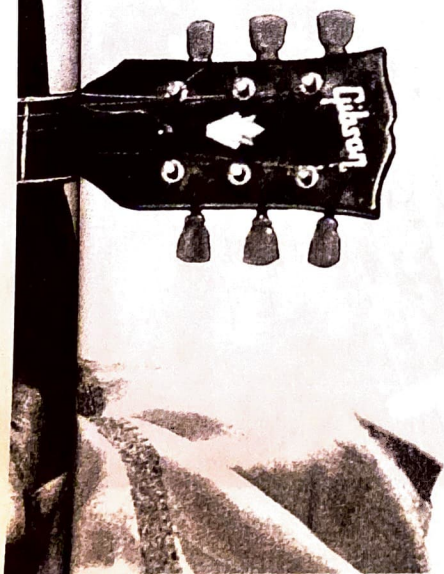


s 'Musical Journey Through Life'

# Open Worlds

« By David Adler « Photo by Jack Vartoogian

It seems fitting for John McLaughlin to release a thoroughly Western guitar concerto as he's in the thick of touring his Indian classical ensemble, Remember Shakti. But world music is simply a constant for McLaughlin. Since he came to prominence at age 27 as a force in Miles Davis' electric bands, McLaughlin has studied an array of musical and spiritual traditions and made them part of the fabric of his life.





Pointing to the nearest copy of his new Verve release, *Thieves And Poets*, McLaughlin reflects on the title track, an ambitious three-movement suite for nylon-string guitar, symphony orchestra and additional soloists. "I hear Gil Evans and Miles, I hear flamenco and Indian influences—I even hear stuff from the Mahavishnu Orchestra in this," he says. "I didn't do it intentionally, but it's funny how it comes out."

McLaughlin grew up in Yorkshire, England, listening to BBC Radio and digesting everything from Muddy Waters to Django Reinhardt; from flamenco and Indian classical music to Davis. "All in the space of about five years," he marvels. "I got zapped. And they all left their mark."

Listeners get an unusually close, sustained view of McLaughlin's creative coming-of-age with *The Complete Jack Johnson Sessions*, Columbia/Legacy's latest Davis box set, which beat *Thieves And Poets* to the shelves by about two weeks. The two releases are worlds apart, yet they document the multilayered contours of a singular musical consciousness.

In his self-penned liner notes to *Thieves And Poets*, McLaughlin takes an introspective tone and describes the concerto as "a story of my musical journey through life." He identifies an Old World feel in the first movement, a transitional feel in the second, and a New World feel in the third.

"The third movement, it's big band," he says in an interview in the fall, as he was in New York around the release of *Thieves And Poets*. "Everything's triplets, and jazz rhythm is based on triplets. I explained to [conductor] Renato Rivolta that there's no dragging, no rallentando." He rolls the "r" in jest, chuckling. "When you hit, you hit."

The work began as "Europa" and went through a number of drafts over the past 15 years. It was commissioned by the Cologne, Germany-based Deutsche Kammerphilharmonie, which toured Europe with McLaughlin and gave the piece its first exposure. Some years later McLaughlin remade the piece for large orchestra and performed it for four nights with the Orquestra de Paris, in a double bill with Paco de Lucía.

The experience left McLaughlin frustrated. "This was at the time of the '91 Gulf War," he recalls. "But there was another war going on, between the orchestra and the conductor. They wouldn't speak to each other. Paco and I arrived for rehearsals and things got messy right away. So I just took my score and talked to the sections individually. 'On the third movement, you've gotta give me that thing! Tighten up!' And as soon as I said that, they were like yes, of course. So we got through it, but after that I didn't want to see the piece for a long time."

Enter Jean-Christophe Maillot of Les Ballets de Monte Carlo, who approached McLaughlin several years later and asked for an orchestral piece to choreograph. With some measure of dread, McLaughlin took what would soon become "Thieves And Poets" off the shelf and began to revise. When he was ready to record, he found a suitable orchestra called I Pommeriggi Musicali di Milano (Musical Afternoons in Milan). He recorded the orchestra first, then returned to his home studio in Monaco to record the additional soloists: violinist Viktoria Mullova, cellist Matt Haimovitz, clarinetist Paul Meyer, second guitarist Philippe Loli and timpanist Bruno Frumento.

After a brooding, Eastern-tinged introduction, the piece takes on an upbeat character, with odd meters and subtle dynamics gelling to create a celebratory dance. As always, McLaughlin makes his own rules, playing nylon-string guitar with a pick, scurrying through the sunny landscape with a hard yet graceful attack. The man who started out as Davis' apostle of snarl and feedback continues to champion the more delicate delights of the acoustic guitar.

Just when the "big band" splash of the third and final movement comes to a close, the album takes a markedly inward turn. Next come the standards "My Foolish Heart," "The Dolphin," "Stella By Starlight" and "My Romance," arranged for the Aigietta Guitar Quartet, with Helmut Scharlmüller on acoustic bass guitar and McLaughlin as soloist. This is the instrumentation heard on 1993's *Time Remembered: John McLaughlin Plays Bill Evans* (Verve), the seed of which was planted by an overdubbed treatment of Evans' "Very Early" that appeared on 1981's *Belo Horizonte*. "It's a classical approach," McLaughlin says, "very much in keeping with the orchestral thing, with the exception that the orchestra gets really powerful sometimes, and the standards are very interior. I like the balance."

McLaughlin seems happy with the result of *Thieves And Poets*, but also relieved to put orchestral projects behind him. "I'll never do it again," he declares. "Three follies in my life are enough." The other two were 1974's *Apocalypse*, produced by George Martin and featuring the second incarnation of the Mahavishnu Orchestra; and 1988's *Mediterranean Concerto*, a more "straightahead" classical outing. Both efforts were orchestrated by Michael Gibbs and featured the London Symphony Orchestra.

McLaughlin remembers the Los Angeles premiere of *Mediterranean* in 1986 far more fondly than the recording itself: "I wasn't even allowed on the mix, and that bothered me. I vowed never to make the same mistake."

McLaughlin has far more positive things to say about





*Apocalypse*, although he nods his head in mock disapproval: "We were loud—so loud we had to be in another studio with a video connection." The album begins, however, with "Power Of Love," four-plus minutes of sheer tranquility and exquisite harmonic color. McLaughlin's acoustic guitar hovers over the ensemble, both moving together in a sinuous 3/4. An orchestra bell haunts the ending, pealing in unison with the fading piano. "Power Of Love" doesn't sound like "Thieves And Poets," but it was perhaps a sign of things to come.

As was, in a different way, *The Complete Jack Johnson Sessions*, which finds McLaughlin unearthing sounds that augur the Mahavishnu Orchestra classics *The Inner Mounting Flame* and *Birds Of Fire*. He is central to the *Jack Johnson* box.

The volume of previously unreleased *Jack Johnson* material is enormous, including five revealing, down-and-dirty takes of "Go Ahead John," subsequently trimmed and spliced for the 28-minute version heard on Davis' 1974 *Big Fun*; a 22-bar slow jam in 6/8 titled "Archie Moore," which showcases McLaughlin in a trio setting with Dave Holland and Jack DeJohnette; and the stuttering funk freakout "Sugar Ray." There are also four takes of "Right Off" and two of "Duran," all of which feature McLaughlin with future Mahavishnu bandmate Billy Cobham. When the first, previously unreleased "Duran" ends, Davis' coarse whisper comes over the mic: "That's some raunchy shit, John."

"This was such an amazing period for music, and even more amazing for me personally," McLaughlin says. "Miles improvised in a way that I'd never heard before, or since. I can say categorically that I would never have achieved what I have without him and his support throughout the years."

McLaughlin rekindled another musical affiliation with his appearances on "Univoyage" and "Faith Run" from *Universal Syncopations*, bassist Miroslav Vitous' first ECM outing in more than a decade. Vitous and McLaughlin played together on a number of late-'60s sessions, including Wayne Shorter's *Super Nova*, Larry Coryell's *Spaces* and Vitous' *Mountain In The Clouds*. Their reunion on *Universal Syncopations* is brief but enticing; as is McLaughlin's appearance on "Joshua," the final track on guitarist Bireli Lagrene's new Sunnyside release, *Front Page*.

But McLaughlin's most visible gig of late has been Remember Shakti, featuring Zakir Hussain on tabla, U. Shrinivas on electric mandolin and V. Selvaganesh on kanjira and other percussion. The group has been touring extensively, a headline feature at concert halls and festivals around the world. They have three recordings under their belt and are currently planning a fourth, featuring master vocalist Shankar Mahadevan, who appeared briefly on 2001's *Saturday Night In Bombay*.

With Remember Shakti, the centrality of rhythm in McLaughlin's playing comes to the fore. "In jazz or fusion, whether East or West," he contends, "improvisation with rhythm is universal. What this means is that melodic improvisers must have a developed conception of rhythm."

McLaughlin stresses this in a forthcoming instructional DVD, *This Is How I Do It*. "I've addressed rhythmic articulation from the very beginning of the DVD all the way to the end," he says. "I'm hoping to make a second DVD with Selvaganesh on the instruction of konnakol (vocal, syllabic improvisation), the most simple and yet most sophisticated system of rhythmic comprehension in the world."

On other fronts, McLaughlin keeps his words tantalizingly vague. "I have a major recording project [in the works] which will definitely take a new departure in form, essentially breaking every form I know and rebuilding them," he teases. "I've started, and I feel good about where I'm going."

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