

John McLaughlin has made an immeasurable impact on the history of jazz, both as a sideman on a string of seminal Miles Davis LPs and as a leader of his own trailblazing groups. ROB GARRATT chats to a man often called the best guitarist in the world as he arrives in Norwich next week.

Emotion and all that jazz

TO JOHN MCLAUGHLIN, MUSIC IS FAR MORE THAN THE NOTES ON A PAGE, the inspiration in the brain, or even the vibrations that reach the ear.

Music is a unique expression of everything the player is feeling at that moment; an encapsulation of one's unconscious state of mind.

Known both for his harmonic invention and breathtakingly fast finger work, it's hard to imagine McLaughlin has anything but scales on his mind.

But to the guitarist, his playing and emotions are intrinsically intertwined. His new album, *To The One*, he tells me, takes in the entire "journey" of his "musical and spiritual development" to date.

Which makes it quite a trip; having made an unmistakable mark on the course of jazz, both on his 40-plus LPs as leader, and the crucial half-dozen albums he made with jazz's greatest innovator, Miles Davis.

Released last month, the album came out of a sudden flash of spiritual inspiration. "I had no intention of recording," explains McLaughlin on a crisp line from his home of 28 years, Monte Carlo.

"I'd just finished a year on the road with Chick Corea and I was happy to do nothing – but the music had other ideas.

"I was in a restaurant with my family and music started coming in my head, I said 'someone get me a Kleenex!'

"Someone had a cardboard box and I was ripping it apart, the ideas were coming and if I don't write them down I forget.

"Basically I'm under orders – 'write this down now'."

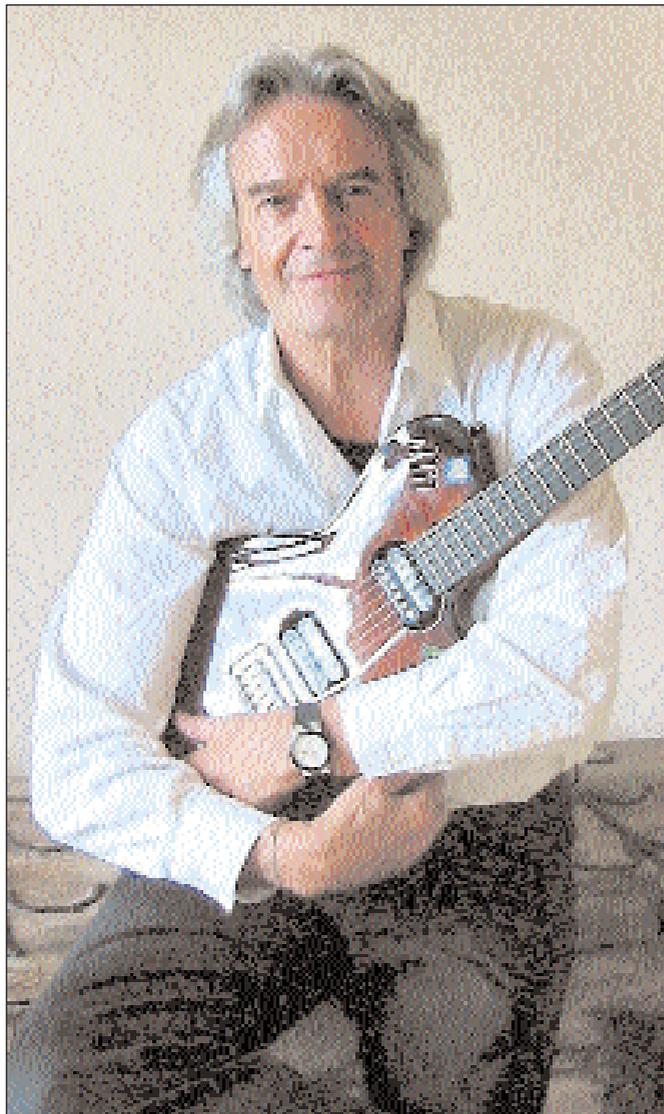
The result is a record which, McLaughlin explains, expresses his feelings about the discovery of his "interior" world, about "walking the line", and about his conviction which every act we perform is connected to a metaphysical entity, "The One".

And if that wasn't ambitious enough, the record is also a response to John Coltrane's own glittering expression of Christian faith, *A Love Supreme*, and traces McLaughlin's own development since hearing the monumental album as a young British musician upon its 1965 release.

It was a few years later that his own incendiary playing was thrown into the public limelight, after moving to New York and joining Tony Williams's pioneering fusion project, *Lifetime*, before catching the attention of Williams's old boss, Miles Davis.

Far from being just another sideman, McLaughlin's electric style dictated and drove the trailblazing fusion collages Davis was experimenting with.

His first recorded work with Davis, *In A Silent Way*, was a haunting pre-ambient



collage constructed with pioneering tape loops which put McLaughlin alongside luminaries like Wayne Shorter, Chick Corea, Herbie Hancock and Joe Zawinul, players he still lists today as the best he has performed with.

Next came *Bitches Brew*, a dark, uncompromising 2LP set of electric jams which became one of the best selling jazz albums ever.

McLaughlin was established as Miles's guitarist of choice, his edgy style defining the string of genre-bending LPs to follow, including *A Tribute To Jack Johnson*, *Live-Evil*, *On The Corner* and *Big Fun*. The guitarist's contribution was acknowledged with two pieces named after him, "Go Ahead John" and, simply, "John McLaughlin".

"He [Davis] was more like my good friend," remembered McLaughlin. "He made sure I ate, took care of me, gave me money without asking.

"He would ask me 'are you reading?' He was really special – in addition to colossal debt musically I have, I wouldn't be where I am today, not at all.

"To have the opportunity to work with him and know him and hang out, what a marvellous gift."

McLaughlin only left Davis after strict instructions ("Miles told me it was time I formed my own group, and since he was the most honest man I ever met, I took him at his word,") and went on to form trailblazing fusion quintet the Mahavishnu Orchestra.

Combining heavy, frantic riffing with jazz virtuosity, the band was a hit with rock audiences – supporting Aerosmith on an early tour – and sold more than any jazz artist could hope for, establishing McLaughlin as the post-Hendrix guitar hero of choice.

"Mahavishnu was pretty intense and pretty loud, I am not so heavy any more," says McLaughlin. "The music was very powerful – that's the way I feel it."

After five years and six albums across two distinct line-ups, McLaughlin ditched his electric guitar and rack of amps and recruited a group of Indian musicians for acoustic project Shakti, an influential precursor to world-fusion.

"I got flack from the record company, my agent; they said 'what are you doing sitting on a carpet with an acoustic guitar and a bunch of Indian musicians?'," McLaughlin remembers.

Since then, McLaughlin has flitted habitually between electric fusion works and acoustic albums, and formed a group with two of the world's best guitarists, Al Di Meo and flamenco legend Paco De Lucia ("what a phenomenal player").

His recent work has formed a crescendo, the dense jazz fusion on 2006's *Industrial Zen* bettered by 2008's *Floating Point*, recorded in India with a troupe of native musicians.

To The One, recorded with his stable band of four years, the *Fourth Dimension*, is sparser than both its predecessors – a shorter, more soulful contemplative offering.

His concert at the Theatre Royal will undoubtedly be a rich experience, a rare chance to see one of the few remaining players from the golden era of jazz, scaling stratospheric heights of artistic and spiritual enlightenment.

"I have been very fortunate throughout my life," sums up McLaughlin. "I just do what comes in my head.

"I work like a painter – some of my friends are painters and they don't know what they're going to paint next.

"Neither do I. I just wait for the inspiration to come."

■ John McLaughlin performs at the Theatre Royal, Norwich, on Wednesday, May 12, at 8pm. Tickets are from £6. More details on 01603 630000.

JAZZ GREAT: John McLaughlin's journey of musical development has been quite a trip – and one which brings him to the Theatre Royal next week.

ON THIS DAY

2000: Ken Livingstone is elected mayor of London.

1966: The Labour government agrees to increase doctors' and dentists' salaries by 30pc.

1970: National Guardsmen at Kent State University Ohio fire on a group of students, killing four.

1979: The Conservatives win the general election making Margaret Thatcher Britain's first woman prime minister.

1982: HMS Sheffield is sunk by an Argentine missile.



FROM THE EDP 40 YEARS AGO

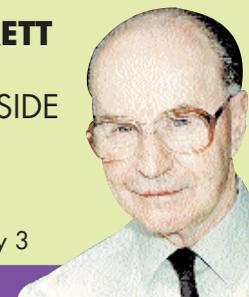
There were 700 participants in the 29th Beccles Music Festival at the Modern School on Friday evening and Saturday. The festival was organised by the Beccles sub-committee of the East Suffolk County Music Committee and the chairman, Mr J W Belgrave, said: "It has been one of the happiest festivals for many years."

100 YEARS AGO

The King, who had spent the weekend at Sandringham, returned to

Buckingham Palace. The Bishop of Norwich, the Rev Dr Pollock, did homage. He was introduced to the King by the Home Secretary, and the Clerk of the Closet and the bishop of Ripon. The Home Secretary read the declaration of loyalty, the Bishop repeating it after him. The bishop took the oath by kissing the Bible and afterwards kissed the King's hand. It was also noted that the Queen had bought a weathercock in the shape of a hunting design made by Mrs Burn, of Oakham, Rutland.

PERCY TRETT
IN THE
COUNTRYSIDE



Yarmouth, May 3

Herbal cures didn't seem to do Rungy Bob any damage

A short while ago I was at a meeting and the conversation went round to the natural medicines made by country folk and in the towns by herbalists which were concocted to combat the ills which afflicted them.

By and large our ancestors were a healthy lot – tough and resilient. A condition brought about by natural selection.

Only the fittest lived to breed, the rest died.

A fact which raises the question of: have we reached a point now where we are actually weakening our own race?

One elderly man mentioned how the late Ted Ellis had told a gathering about a 90-year-old naval veteran, Robert Dennis, who lived near Woodcock Hall, who everyone knew as 'Rungy Bob'.

Apparently, Rungy was a familiar character at the local pub where he would have his regular drink and buy his chewing tobacco.

Ted said he, like many retired seamen, kept a good garden in which he grew an abundance of greater celandine.

Now Rungy had seen service in many parts of our then far-flung empire and as a consequence from time to time he became jaundiced and had recurring bouts of malaria.

When he felt one of these attacks coming on, he would go to his outhouse where he had hung bunches of dried celandine and take some down, put it in a saucepan, boil it and let it cool down, strain and then drink the liquid.

After which he would not be seen for the next fortnight.

He would then reappear, and carry on as normal as if nothing had happened.

That the liquid did him no harm is evident for he lived to be over 90 and this he put down to the humble celandine.

He said it would only work if the plant was plucked before the flowers had opened – of course as soon as the petals started to wilt it was no use to him.

Now I and others have searched through our herbals, and on the internet, and find that the whole plant is toxic.

The sap is bright orange and is excellent to remove warts and moles.

It is mildly analgesic in the correct dosages, working on the central nervous system; it increases blood pressure and widens arteries but there is absolutely no mention of it being used for bouts of malaria.

I know our late wise woman, Jenny, used to save and dry some roots of celandine for anyone suffering from toothache, to chew upon and it was effective.

WHERE TO JOIN

- Norfolk Wildlife Trust: 01603 625540
- Norfolk and Norwich Naturalists' Society: 01603 457270
- RSPB (East Anglia): 01603 661662
- British Trust for Ornithology: 01842 750050