

On Music and Spirit

John McLaughlin

To speak about music is an exercise in futility, as is to speak about spirituality; and to speak about both has to be a fast track to frustration. However, as curious humans we desire to understand the nature of Reality with the discursive mind. So I will try. The basic problem is that neither spirituality nor music belong to the level of the day-to-day mind.

All that can be said discursively about music are the technical aspects. For example: the development of technique and the diverse qualities of intervalic relationships, to mention two. But to speak about spirituality is fraught with problems of syntax. I can, in the non-discursive language of the spirit, pronounce that ‘One is One and One is Two’; however, the language of this reality is in direct conflict with the language of the day-to-day mind.

Fortunately, there have been, and are alive today, women and men of very high spiritual awareness who are lucid enough to be able to share their perception of reality in books and meetings, and on the internet. We now have numerous sources of inspiration of a spiritual nature available to us.

In a sense, it seems to me that the term ‘spiritual development’ is in fact the progressive revealing of our inmost nature. Moreover, the ultimate goal of any spiritual development is to become what we have always been and always will be from the very beginning of our life, and that is Pure Nature. Pure Nature being Pure Consciousness or Pure Awareness.

The discriminating aspect of the discursive mind functions with words which are mere representations of something else and, in a sense, ‘unreal’; whereas the discriminating sense of the spirit seeks Beauty and Truth, both of which are aspects of the spirit and, as such,

indescribable. An inner truth such as ‘I am pure awareness’ is undefinable because there is no form, and is therefore nameless compared to ‘My name is John McLaughlin’, a definable truth.

There are certain exceptions to this statement: for example, the famous statement $E = mc^2$ by Albert Einstein is definably ‘true’ but also beautiful in its elegance.

Generally speaking, though, the only analogy between the world of the spirit and the day-to-day mind is the lack of words when trying to explain to someone how magnificent a particular improvisation of John Coltrane’s is. All one needs is to listen to the music, and words will no longer be required. Ideally, sharing an experience of Beauty and Truth with someone can enhance the experience. Furthermore, it could be said that concert halls, jazz clubs, museums of art, are in fact places where spirit experiences spirit. At this point I must include nature itself: the mountains, the oceans and forests are all places where the human spirit communes with the beauty of nature.

All that said, after a lifetime in music, I am convinced that the majority of human beings intuitively recognise the spiritual aspects of Beauty and Truth in music and art simply because the Reality of Beauty and Truth is indisputable, particularly when imbued with passion or pure emotion. It’s like a light that is suddenly turned on. Moreover, there can be sensitive people in an audience who have little interest in ‘spiritual matters’, but who are very sensitive to the inner and outer beauty of music that can be experienced in a live concert. Nevertheless, we are all drawn to music and art instinctively because the fundamental

characteristics of human nature consist of Beauty, Joy and Truth.

My life in music is the constant search for the inner beauty that will inspire me to find ways to express what is essentially unspeakable. Sometimes, however, this search grinds to a halt simply because there's nothing there, or more likely, I am unable, for various reasons, to access that part of my inner consciousness where Beauty and Truth exist. Fortunately meditation is a magic key in unlocking the hidden and unconscious beauty that one can find within, which is why I recommend to any musician who wants to better understand the nature of music that they practise meditation.

It is my personal conviction that only through meditation and inner contemplation can we discover who and what we are. Over time, this can lead to a development in the inner richness of creativity upon which the outer richness of creativity depends.

This is particularly important in the world of improvised music. In order to improvise musically, one needs to have a certain degree of mastery over one's instrument. If not, the instrument will at some point master you. Secondly, a lucid comprehension of harmony is essential if the musician's way in improvisation is with Western harmony. Indian musicians play in a completely linear way and harmony does not enter into the equation, but even so, Indian musicians are amongst the most marvellous and inspired improvisers.

Thirdly, a high degree of rhythmic development is also essential in view of the fact that the two major schools of improvisation – the classical schools of North and South India, and Jazz – both require rigorous discipline in the articulation of rhythm and, last but not least, spontaneous creativity or imagination.

So, once you have attained a degree of mastery of the elements above, and your band leader has just singled you out to play the next improvised solo, my question is, what are you going to say? (I use the word 'say' figuratively).

You are required to keep the integrity of the harmonic and rhythmic structure, but there you are, in front of the audience, who are expecting to be captured by you and your performance. This is the principal reason why people go to a live concert (it's certainly my main reason). As a listener, I want to be captured by the music of the player and be allowed to enter his or her inner worlds of Beauty, Truth and Joy.

But there is a critical element about whether the listener will be captured, and that element is the degree of passion or pure emotion that ignites the notes played. And here we have the union of the head and the heart, since without the passion of the player's life imbued in the notes, they will be exactly that – just notes.

This begs the questions: How deeply do you feel about what you are doing? How deeply do you feel about the musicians around you, about the world, the Universe, God or the Infinite Spirit? And are you and your playing truly integrated with the other musicians? Are you truly connected to them, or are you simply using them to demonstrate your fanciful flights of technical prowess? I am aware of this experience :-). Your liberation as a soloist is wholly dependent upon the support of the musicians around you, so how deep is your connection to them?

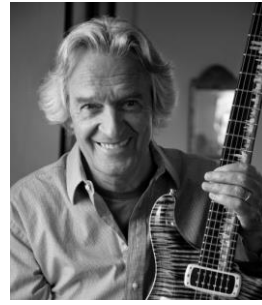
Clearly, the depth of your feelings is the fuel to the emotion that will give life to your playing. As a consequence, meditation and inner contemplation are highly recommended, if not indispensable, in knowing oneself and the depth of one's emotional awareness. In the inner world of the spirit, there are experiences that cannot be translated by the discursive mind and are therefore unspeakable. Fortunately, in music we are able to find ways to articulate these experiences.

To return to improvisation, the soloist or improviser of necessity needs to let go and abandon himself or herself to the spontaneous now. Essentially, if you're thinking, you're not playing; and if you're playing, you're not thinking. This requires trust in oneself, and is

the point of liberation from the heaviness of the discursive mind to the spontaneous creative joy of the instinctive intuitive self.

Of course, frequently, there are times when we are without inspiration and access to the depths of the inner worlds, and we play the ‘known’ instead of the ‘unknown’. Inspiration and creativity are not always available when we want them to be, and most of us musicians have lots of those kinds of nights when they remain just out of reach. What’s important, though, is to know that the lovely bird of inspiration will land again on your shoulder, and all that is necessary is that you are READY!

About the contributor



John McLaughlin (b. 1942) is an English guitarist, bandleader and prolific composer, incorporating many jazz genres uniquely coupled with elements of rock, Indian and Western classical music, flamenco and blues. Profoundly

influenced by Indian music, John is a leading pioneer of the fusion genre, incorporating great speed of playing, technical precision and harmonic sophistication, along with exotic scales and unconventional time signatures. Following a notable early career on England’s 1960s rhythm & blues scene, John then played in the USA with Tony Williams Lifetime and the legendary trumpeter Miles Davis. His Mahavishnu Orchestra (1971–5) performed a technically virtuosic, complex style of music fusing electric jazz and rock with Indian influences. A Grammy winner who’s won multiple awards over many years, guitarist Jeff Beck has called John ‘the best guitarist alive’. John from time to time resurrects his legendary World Music group Shakti; and his current band The 4th Dimension is critically acclaimed as one of his most successful bands. A major influence on a number of prominent musicians, according to jazz guitarist Pat Metheny, John McLaughlin has changed the evolution of the guitar during several of his periods of playing, and he continues to be a boldly innovative player and composer to this day.

SOME HUMANISTIC WISDOM

“Music can name the unnameable and communicate the unknowable.”

Leonard Bernstein (1918–1990)