Self & Society, 2016
Vol. 44, No. 4, 355–371, http://dx.doi.org/10.1080/03060497.2016.1246785

Routledge
Taylor & Francis Group

THE *SELF & SOCIETY* INTERVIEW: a musical symposium

British guitarist John McLaughlin in conversation

John McLaughlin, Richard House* and David Kalisch**

Editorial introduction

As co-editors, over the years we have sometimes had conversations about things other than Humanistic Psychology and therapy! – and we were delighted earlier this year to discover a mutual shared interest in, and love of, the music of the prolific British guitarist and master musician, John McLaughlin. This in turn led Richard to pursue one of his many improbable dreams – an interview with the great man for this journal, which would in part fulfil a long-held personal dream, and also help rectify an important lack in the journal – its coverage of 'things musical' in the context of Humanistic Psychology and all it represents. Neither of us can still quite believe what came of that dream – a long and engaging interview with John which brims with insight, wisdom, intelligence and, above all, one person's deep personal and professional engagement with the magic of music. We are still in awe at John's generosity in being prepared to devote so much of his time to this creation, and to answering our questions in such careful detail; and we're thrilled to be able to offer the interview to our readers and to the music world more generally – for Routledge have very kindly made this interview freely available online in its entirety. Generosity is clearly infectious!

So we owe deep gratitude to John, his wife Ina and his agent for enabling this landmark interview to happen; and we hope and trust that it will serve as an entry point for many of our readers into the oeuvre of one of the very greatest of musicians alive today. The content of the interview resoundingly confirms our original hunch that there are

*Email: richardahouse@hotmail.com; **davkalisch@aol.com

multiple cross-overs and commonalities between John's whole approach to his musical art and the core concerns of Humanistic Psychology. Please bring the interview to the attention of your interested friends and colleagues. And as always we would welcome letters from our readers on anything that touches you in this interview, and more generally any thoughts that the interview might precipitate on the place of music in Humanistic Psychology.

The Editors, September 2016

Richard House and David Kalisch (*S&S*): John, David and I need to just say something at the outset about the context of this interview. For us, it is without doubt one of the highlights of this journal's auspicious 44-year history. We are both great admirers of your music, going right back to around the early 1970s – and we're struck by how the very first issue of this journal was published in 1973 when your legendary Mahavishnu Orchestra was at the peak of its powers. When I (Richard) heard your 'Inner Mounting Flame' LP in 1972 at the age of 17, it made an enormous spiritual impact on me, and it's no exaggeration to say that that extraordinary music changed my life forever. Since then, I've read that your music of that time had a similar impact on many thousands of people the world over, and perhaps we may explore this extraordinary phenomenon a bit later in the interview.

And if I (David) can add: being at university in the late 1960s when all that creativity burst the bounds of the 'pop song' and rock guitarists like Hendrix, Clapton, Garcia and Zappa started to extemporize at length, it was natural for me, like Richard and many many others, to gravitate towards jazz-rock-Latin fusion; and again it was one of your Mahavishnu albums, 'Love, Devotion, Surrender' with Carlos Santana, that impacted on me, especially your preparedness to take on such iconic works of the modern jazz canon as 'A Love Supreme' and 'Naima'. And again, it was not just the jaw-dropping guitar virtuosity but the spiritual intensity and intent of your playing that, for me, rewrote the possibilities of what modern non-classical music was capable of.

So now we've cleared the ground of our star-struckness, John, can we ask you, first, to share something about you and your wife's work with music therapy in the Middle East? Perhaps an appropriate scene-setting question might be, at what stage of your career did you first become aware of, and get interested in, the healing power of music? And have you experienced that healing power yourself in your own life, or in the lives of those close to you?

John McLaughlin (JM): Thank you for the unnecessary but kind words!

About six years ago I was awarded a prize for my musical contributions in Bremen, Germany. The prize was 15,000 euros, and of course I was flattered at such an unexpected event. That said, I felt I hadn't really earned this money, and that it should go to someone who really needed it. I spoke to my wife Ina, who has had considerable experience working with Non-Governmental Organizations (NGOs) in India and Pakistan, about a 'suitable' recipient; and since the prize was an award for a musical contribution, it made sense to her to find an NGO working with music. And we wanted to donate it to one of the most neglected places – and that's how we came across Al Mada, a Palestinian NGO helping traumatized children and women through music therapy. After a personal contact was established, we decided to visit the organization ourselves, and we organized two solidarity concerts in Ramallah. We continue to support their extraordinary work, and a couple of months ago we set up a fundraiser for their project 'For My Identity I Sing'. (See http://igg.me/at/rsS0-UuQ20s.)

I have personally been aware of the innate power in music since I was five years old, having had a remarkable psycho-physical experience through music during which my bodily hair stood on end. Fortunately my mother was there to explain what it was. I personally believe it was this experience that made me a musician for life.

For a long time I was unaware of the healing properties of music. As a young man, all I was interested in was playing. Playing always gave me joy, so in a way, since joy is most definitely a healing human experience, it was 'healing' me even though I was not aware of 'being ill'!

I began to notice in the 1970s that the act of playing music had certain psycho-physical effects that reminded me of my childhood. During extended periods of touring, there were times when we musicians would get a cold or the 'flu, and we would come off healed. I think this is a true testimony to the healing powers in music.

P.S. If you'd like to know more about the extraordinary work of Al Mada, I would be happy to give you more information. We have witnessed first-hand how music can change the lives of individuals.

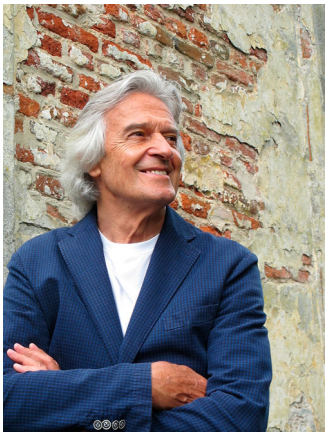
***S&S* (David):** Thanks for such a fulsome answer, John, which opens up several avenues that we'd like to explore with you. First off: we were astounded by your recounting the number of times you've literally experienced the 'healing power of music' directly when you've played with a bad cold or 'flu and come off stage cured! We were wondering whether you've come across other musicians who've had similar experiences. And do you have a sense of how this happens?

And yes, we're very keen to hear more about your work with Al Mada and Ina's work in India and Pakistan. But first, can we focus in a bit more on this phenomenon that you've experienced frequently and directly, of the healing power of music?

JM: Regarding your question about 'self-healing' in concert, it seems quite natural to me, though I have to admit, it's only happened several times because I've only gone on stage sick a few times. I've never enquired of any musician about this phenomenon since I'm sure they would reply in the affirmative. What I feel happens is the following.

It's quite well known that we can heal ourselves from small illnesses, though there are also stories of people curing themselves of cancers and other very serious illnesses. In meditation, we become intimately aware of our physical condition as well as our mental and 'spiritual' state. I don't care to use this word, but I will for the sake of

convenience. Though I've never attempted it, I believe it's possible to cure ourselves through the self-awareness that comes from altered states of consciousness that occur during meditation.



The act of playing music, particularly with musicians with whom you have a deep complicity, encourages a kind of self-forgetfulness. When the performance of the music integrates improvisation, another dimension is brought into the complicity. Improvisation is of necessity spontaneous, and when it is collective, there is an even greater impulse to self-forgetfulness, though paradoxically you are still aware of yourself!

This can lead (though this is not controllable) into another state of consciousness in the collective state of spontaneity, one of joy, of affection, love and even humour. It is my conviction that this state of consciousness is responsible for curing illness.

***S&S* (Richard):** That's a great answer, John; and from the point of view of Humanistic Psychology, which places a central emphasis on subjective *experience* and human consciousness, this makes complete sense to us. Most humanistic and transpersonal therapists strongly adhere to the notion that it's ultimately *love* that heals or cures (and *not* therapeutic 'techniques' etc.). And while there will always be deep and complex philosophical discussions about what 'love' actually consists in, it seems to us that what you're describing so clearly here falls into the category of 'healing through love'. So thank you for this answer – indeed, when we noticed in another interview that you were a follower of the great Alan Watts' work, we had a strong hunch that your views on matters such as these would be very close to a humanistic and transpersonal ethos; and we're really thrilled that this interview seems to be confirming that.

Let's continue this theme of healing through music, with perhaps you saying something of how you were drawn to music therapy – when you first became aware of it as a practice, whether the healing power of such a therapy needs the therapist to be a competent (or inspiring?) musician themselves, and so on. Or indeed whatever you might feel moved to share with us about your engagement with music therapy. It's perhaps one of the great lacunae of our journal that we very rarely feature music therapy, so this is a great opportunity for us to make up for that with a master musician.

JM: I'd heard of music therapy many years ago, but didn't really know what it was all about. I guessed it would be about the psycho-physical effect music has on the mind and nervous system, since I'd experienced this many years ago, as you know, but didn't really think too much about it. It was seeing it in action that convinced me of its true value as therapy.

This happened in Ramallah, witnessing the programme 'For My Identity I Sing' that was introduced by the NGO we're supporting, Al Mada. Seeing Palestine there, on the ground, is not the same as seeing it on TV. It's like night and day. I don't wish to go deeply into the politics governing the situation there; it's enough to say that the situation for all Palestinians in general, and for young Palestinians in particular, is absolutely terrible, and totally frustrating in all aspects of daily life. There is a lot of depression and anxiety amongst the youth living in the refugee camps. To see that teenagers have the opportunity to come together, make music together, sing together, is nothing short of wonderful. One could see the effect music has in bringing some kind of relief and happiness. And it gives the teenagers a powerful tool to express themselves. In addition, Al Mada has a programme for the women of Ramallah, whose lives are also beset with daily difficulties, and it is through the use of music and rhythm that this programme brings much happiness to the women. You really have to see these programmes in action to see what happens to the teenagers singing, and the women in their rhythm group. You can see the positive power that music has in action. It's just marvellous! (For more information, see http://al-mada.ps.)

Ina's choice of Al Mada was perfect for me, since I'd been inspired by the work of Daniel Barenboim in his formation of the West–Eastern Divan Orchestra (about which you can find information online). Al Mada received the prize money with gratitude, and it was spent on musical instruments for the different programmes they're working with.

Within a couple of years, with the help of Al Mada, United Nations Relief and Works Agency for Palestine (UNWRA) and The United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization (UNESCO), we'd organized a 'solidarity' concert with the group Shakti in Ramallah, and we played a second 'solidarity' concert in Ramallah last year. You can believe me when I say that the Palestinian people are so grateful to anyone who makes an effort to show them that they are not alone, especially if they make the effort to go to Palestine. I can say with no exaggeration that the situation in Palestine is dramatic. I'm not speaking about Gaza, where the situation is nothing short of catastrophic, but the entire country of Palestine is in dire need of real and immediate international support.

***S&S*:** You've made a fantastic contribution there, John – this is a deeply moving story. And perhaps on a more subjective level, if you'd like to, can you say something about what if anything feels different to you personally in performing unpaid in contexts like Ramallah and East Jerusalem, compared to your scheduled 'gigs' in trouble-free cities?

JM: As far as playing a concert there compared to elsewhere in the world is concerned, when you see the reality of Palestine today, it's impossible not to get caught up in the sense of frustration and hopelessness in which the Palestinians live on a daily basis. The gigantic wall that separates families and the constant controls by the Israeli military render a 'normal' life absolutely impossible. For example, before starting our

second concert, for some unknown reason many arbitrary controls by the Israelis prevented over 50% of the audience from arriving in time for the performance. The organizers received so many calls, we had to delay the performance for one hour to allow people to arrive at the hall.

By the time the musicians went to the stage, we were acutely aware of the overall tension and we were affected by it. This atmosphere does not exist elsewhere, and I've never been in a comparable situation. When we started to play, the tension in the musicians began to dissipate and the music started to take over.

I'd like to bring your attention to a few salient points relevant to this discussion. I had the chance to get invited last year to play at the World Woman Conference in Oslo, which was organized by the extraordinary woman Deeyah Khan. The conference highlighted not only the role of women in social change, but also the role of art and music. The role of art is underestimated in society. Art is a very powerful form of communication which can transcend cultural and social boundaries – it can heal and unite, give hope and makes us HUMAN. Because art can be so powerful, it is also seen by some as a great danger and threat. If art did not have the capacity to bring social change, then there would be no need to ban it or destroy it. The difference between politics and art is that art is direct. It is an emotional language, appeals to the hearts and souls and therefore can genuinely connect people.

Furthermore, when I played this year at the UN Jazz Day at the White House, Irina Bukova, the Secretary General of UNESCO, gave a very inspiring speech about this very subject; about the changing perspective of the importance of music and arts. It is still not a widespread view, but UNESCO fully supports the importance and necessity of art and culture in their role of bringing people together, and even helping in the resolution of conflict.

Mrs Bukova gave a very pertinent example in the case of Iceland. After the financial crisis began some years ago, Iceland was in dire straits economically. However,

enlightenment prevailed, and the government responded by building an arts and cultural centre, and against fierce criticism about spending money on culture, it had immediate success. People flocked to it simply to meet other people, to interact, to see concerts and events. In a word, it brought people together in the face of a huge crisis.

It is my profound conviction that the arts are an innate part of the human psyche. Even the cavemen painted pictures on their walls!

***S&S* (Richard):** Following on from your previous answer, John, we wanted to ask you a very broad question about the relationship between music and politics. One can cite many examples of such a connection – for example, Dylan's protest songs in the 1960s ('Masters of War' etc.), the impact of the Special AKA's 'Free Nelson Mandela!' single back in the 1980s, which seemingly had a real political effect; Rock Against Racism, Billy Bragg and the radical folk tradition of Ewan MacColl, etc. etc. But there's also a view around that music and politics don't sit well together, or have at best an uneasy relationship. But perhaps as long as the musician carries with her or him a politically aware sensibility and commitment, it doesn't matter whether this is spelled out overtly (or stridently), because somehow those (can we call them *ethical*?) commitments will be embodied in their creative and artistic work. We'd welcome any thoughts you might have on this, John, perhaps in the context of your own musical engagements in the Middle East.

JM: In a sense, one could say that all our acts have political, social and even spiritual ramifications. A person can be aware or ignorant of the ramifications of their acts, but the effects are still there. The difference is one of power. I feel that if we are aware of the effects of our acts, there is perhaps additional impact simply from the intention behind them. The effect of ignorance of the political or social implications of one's acts could be considered beneficial or not, depending on your point of view. Now while it's true that the resolution of conflict through political dialogue is far superior to physical violence, I believe the only true resolution of human conflict and inequities is through the awareness of the 'spirituality' of our acts. When I use the word 'spiritual', what I mean is: are they beneficial to greater common happiness, or are they self-serving or egoistic in nature?

Music is a world in which there is certainly a degree of ego satisfaction, but it is tempered with a certain humility, since on learning a musical instrument we become aware very early on of our incompetence and ignorance – and this basically continues throughout the musician's life. On the other hand, it is eminently clear that music contributes to a large degree to the general happiness of people, and even to opening doors to unknown areas of consciousness.

All of that said, it is also clear that 'political' songs have great power – power that even dictators fear. We only need to see how many artists have been persecuted, jailed and even killed because of the power of their songs to mobilize popular awareness to tyranny. I regret to a certain degree that I cannot sing, because words in music have an even greater political or social impact, but even so we try. As far back as 1978 I wrote my first 'politically' oriented piece called 'The Unknown Dissident'. It was already clear to me back then that there are countries that imprison and even 'make disappear' political opponents. Once we become aware of the injustices that surround us, then we should do something about communicating this awareness through whatever we do,

whether through art or not. My constant concern about the ongoing situation in Palestine is simply an expression of this awareness, and the need to act.

***S&S* (David):** Thank you for such a comprehensive and engaged response. Something now on a more purely musical theme, John. Several folk in the music press over the years have commented on your love of the violin, and have noted how often through your career you've played with extraordinary violinists, like Jerry Goodman, Jean Luc-Ponty and L. Shankar, and have made a link with the fact that your mother was a classical concert violinist and that you grew up in a music-making household, and specifically one in which the sounds of the violin would have been prominent. How big a formative influence do you think these early childhood experiences, and the fact that your mother was a dedicated professional musician, had on you?

JM: First of all I need to correct your statement about my mother. She was an amateur violinist in an amateur symphony orchestra, not that this made any difference to me or my upbringing. My earliest memories are of symphonic music in the house, and particularly with the great violinists. My first profound musical experience was given to me by my mother. I would have been about five, and she and I were listening to Beethoven's 9th Symphony, or rather she was listening; I was in my five-year-old world, and we were at the end of the recording where the vocal quartet comes in. Quite suddenly I was totally captured by the music, and my hair stood on end. When I asked my mother about this, she seemed very pleased, and said quite matter of factly, 'That is the beauty of music'.

In addition to the piano, which was my first instrument, my mother also taught me the basic techniques of violin playing. However, the sound I produced out of the violin was so bad it disturbed me, and I didn't have the heart to continue practising it. It goes without saying, though, that the violin was in my life from the very beginning, and as a consequence affected my decisions to incorporate the violin and the great players in my musical formations.

As an after-note, I have always loved the Indian instrument, the Sarangi. It is very much part of the violin family, and one of the most soulful instruments I've ever heard.

***S&S* (David):** And in following through a little more on this semi-autobiographical thread, if we may, John – looking back, what would you say were the other influences that formed you into a musician, and more particularly into the specific and very unique musician that you became? For instance, you could well have become a famous classical musician; what factors externally and in your character led you to the road you took?

JM: I should remind you that my musical education changed dramatically from the age of 11. Up to that point I'd been practising the piano, and playing exclusively Western classical music.

I fell in love with the guitar the moment it landed in my arms, and by destiny or karma, this time coincided with my exposure to the great Mississippi blues guitarists and singers, which was a revelation to me in every way. The 'cry' of their playing and singing, the wonderful rhythms they played, the sheer sensuality of that music just blew me away. I stopped playing the piano, and all I wanted to do was listen to the blues players and try to emulate what they were doing on my own guitar. A year or two

later, I was listening to a radio programme by the great musicologist Alan Lomax. He had been in India, and was playing a recording of the late Nagaswaram player Rajarathinan Pillai – and on hearing this music my hair stood on end, just as it had 10 years previously when listening to Beethoven with my mother. I truly believe that it was these two experiences that decided my future as a musician.

My exposure to the music of different cultures continued with my hearing flamenco music a year or so later, and again I was captured by the sheer intensity of emotion coming through this music, coupled with the wonderful guitar playing of the flamenco masters. I actually wanted to become a flamenco guitarist – however, in the small town where I lived it was impossible to find a teacher, and to play true flamenco, you need a teacher or guru.

The last and final music to capture me was jazz. I began hearing jazz from around 15 years old, and shortly afterwards heard Miles Davis for the first time on his recordings of the mid-1950s. In 1958 he made a recording called 'Milestones' with John Coltrane and Cannonball Adderley which defined the school of jazz I adopted. In the previous year, Miles had recorded an album with Gil Evans entitled 'Miles Ahead'. I have to say that this record was pivotal in my concept of what later became 'fusion jazz'. There is a track on this recording called 'Blues for Pablo' (I believe dedicated to Pablo Picasso), and this track is a perfect example of how jazz can integrate another culture's music. For the first time I heard the soul of flamenco with jazz, and I would remind you that the jazz of Miles was always with the blues – and here we have a perfect example of what later became known as 'fusion music'.

Now while it's true I 'abandoned' my classical training in favour of jazz, Western classical music marked me as a child, and after all it was my first love. This love can be seen, or rather heard, in the pieces I wrote for guitar and orchestra (i.e. 'Apocalypse' [1974], 'The Mediterranean' [1990] and 'Thieves and Poets' [2003]). But even before these, I was analysing the great works of my favourite composers, such as Bartok, Dutilleux, Ravel and the great trio of Berg, Schoenberg and Webern. They all were having a strong impact on me already by the time of Mahavishnu. Finally, I have to add that apart from the Western classical 'school', all of the diverse cultural musical expressions I mention above integrated, to some degree or other, the element of improvisation. Improvisation is a way of life in so far as to improvise means to play spontaneously, and to play spontaneously is the first step to living spontaneously and naturally.

From all of the above, it's clear that the experiences of my musical youth determined my future 'way' as a musician.

In ending this question, I'm going to include a paragraph on jazz that I wrote recently for the concert at the White House:

> From its early beginnings, jazz was, and is today, an integration of musical cultures. As such, integration is at the heart of jazz music, as has been proven time and time again. Already in the 1950s jazz was embracing the musical cultures of Central America, and Cuba in particular. By the late 1950s Miles Davis had integrated the sound and soul of the Hispanic Flamenco traditions into jazz, and by the 1970s, Asian and middle Eastern music began to make their musical impact felt in contemporary jazz. It follows that jazz could truly be given the title of 'Global Music'.

There are those who would say that pop-rock music is the global music, and they are right to a degree; but on a brief analysis of pop-rock, we find that it is highly

structured, with little or no room for personal or collective freedom apart from the singer. This is the real heart of the matter. In addition to its multi-cultural nature, jazz had been, from the outset, a way of artistic freedom, of personal and collective liberation, that demands everything from the musician, but gives the opportunity for spontaneous expression that is our true nature.

***S&S* (Richard):** Another musical question, John. It's often said that the best therapists and counsellors are those who have 'flexibility of soul', and are able to be fully 'in the moment' and respond spontaneously and appropriately to what emerges in the living therapy relationship with the client. You've mentioned improvisation several times already. You are a master of musical improvisation, and we were just wondering whether there might be interesting and revealing parallels between what's involved in creative musical/jazz improvisation and in good therapy. I guess this is intended to be an open question for you to speak about the nature of improvisation from the musician's perspective.

JM: The very nature of improvisation is spontaneity. In a way, composition itself is organized improvisation. That is to say, the musician hears in his or her mind the music which is a spontaneous event, and then writes it down and organizes it. Having dedicated my life to music in general and improvisation in particular, I can say without doubt that the art of improvisation is the art of spontaneity and freedom.

As human beings, we all search for 'freedom' of some kind. In the society of today, the big search is for financial freedom, since we are bombarded daily by advertising, that this is the way to 'happiness'. The human being is, however, a much deeper being, and the deeper satisfaction in life is obtained differently. We search for what we call 'fulfilment' – though many people don't even know the true nature of fulfilment, since the ways to obtain true fulfilment are not taught in schools. Fortunately we can find these ways through the works of great men and women.

The masters of the 'spiritual' life are all agreed that true freedom is found in living fully in the moment without thought of the future or past. This is, by definition, living spontaneously, since if we live without thought, we are free in our acts. Again, this is the goal of all improvisers in music: to experience the freedom of simply being and acting spontaneously in music.

Perhaps there are many arguments about living without thought, but I can confirm that when you're playing music, and in particular improvising, if you're thinking, you are not playing, and if you are truly playing, you are not thinking.

***S&S* (Richard):** John, you were creating 'World Music' years before the term had even been thought of! – with the Mahavishnu Orchestra and then Shakti. The motif of 'East meeting West' has been around in Humanistic Psychology since the heady counter-cultural 1960s, with people like radical psychiatrist R.D. (Ronnie) Laing going to India for inspiration. We wondered whether you might say something about this notion of West and East coming together (both musically and more generally), and what both might need to learn from each other.

JM: Your question here relates to what I said earlier. True fulfilment in life is not taught in the educational system of the West. In the East, true fulfilment is known as 'enlightenment', and the ways to this state have been elucidated for thousands of years by the great men and women of the East.

You speak about the counter-cultural 1960s. I know what that means, but personally speaking it was this decade during which I and quite a few other musicians and artists began taking LSD, mescaline and other mind-expanding substances. The overall effect of taking these hallucinogens was the opening of the mind to other levels of consciousness, and the principal result of this opening was bringing to awareness the great existential questions of life, namely: who am I?, what is God?, what is this infinite universe in which we all live and why?

These questions have been addressed for thousands of years in India and China, and they have developed specific ways to find the correct answers to these questions, and these responses can result in bringing a little light into our lives. It was the case for me, so it was a natural move for me and my generation to turn towards India and China to seek help in finding the right responses to these questions.

In India particularly, the ways of enlightenment are not separate from life in general and music in particular. The music of India integrates all the dimensions of the human being, from the most capricious to the most sublime; but it took the work of the late great John Coltrane to successfully bring the awareness of the divine and true nature of the human being into jazz through his recording in the 1960s, 'A Love Supreme': a recording which changed my life.

As far as the East learning from us, that is a question you should address to an easterner. What I can say is that the musicians from India with whom I have had an association for about 45 years are particularly interested in jazz music. The reason for this is that jazz is the only music which shares the common ground of improvisation with the music of India, and they wish to collaborate with us at least as much as we do with them in order to learn the different aspects of 'Western' approaches to improvisation.

***S&S* (Richard):** We were also wondering about the question of drugs, spirituality and music, John. Again there are interesting parallels with therapy here, with people like Stan Grof practising 'LSD Psychotherapy' back in the 1970s. Many (or even most) of us struggled with the question of drugs back in the 1960s and 1970s, and I (Richard) was very inspired by your explicit disavowal of drugs in the early 1970s. People listening to the extraordinary 'Inner Mounting Flame' album (1971) find it scarcely believable that this music wasn't in some sense drug-inspired – and yet when one finds that authentic spiritual place within, one just knows that that music has a purity that comes directly from, and *is*, Spirit – period. And yet arguably, some amazing music *has* been drug-inspired – one thinks immediately of Hendrix, of course (with whom you once famously jammed). And your own breath-taking soloing on the 'Devotion' album (1970) reminds one so much of Hendrix at his best.

We just wondered whether you might say something about this issue, including what lay behind your brave decision to disavow drugs at a time when just about everyone else on the music scene was doing them.

JM: It's fairly safe to say that there's a fundamental problem in the attitude to drugs today. The word 'drug' is obscure, but in our society it frequently has ominous overtones. The perception of drugs is also confused, since we are a society which uses drugs everywhere for healing, and also for 'recreational' purposes. 'Good' drugs save lives, make people healthy again, and are universally welcome and approved by societies. A recreational drug like marijuana is being more and more recognized for its innate

'medicinal' properties, and has lost its 'evil' reputation. It's well known that it is much less harmful to us than alcohol.

Then there are the 'hard' drugs, principally heroin and cocaine, both of which can induce a temporary feeling of pleasure and contentment, but are at the same time killer drugs because addiction to these two is swift and merciless. Having lost dear friends, mainly musicians, to these drugs, I've been strongly against them since the 1960s. That said, these drugs are here to stay because there is a market for them. Why governments have adopted the 'head in the sand' attitude is incomprehensible. Their slogan of 'Just say no to drugs' is a farce. People in general, and Americans in particular, are the first to say that 'nobody has the right to tell me what I can or cannot take' – and the result is a gigantic underground market for heroin and, especially, cocaine.

The policy of prohibition has never worked, and never will. Governments must realize that people will take all kinds of drugs whether legal or not, and this leaves the field wide open to the drug lords and criminals who are now everywhere. At some point, governments will have to legalize all drugs with quality control. The main problem is that governments do not discriminate between drugs that are immensely useful and those that are addictive, which, apart from the 'high' they give, are absolutely useless. All are lumped together and treated as criminal, including the ones I mention below.

These are the non-addictive drugs such as payote-mescaline, 'magic mushrooms', and the more synthetic but as potent LSD. These drugs are powerful, and their power is to alter consciousness. What I mean by that is that they have the power to enable us to access levels of awareness which are difficult to access otherwise. We only need to read Aldous Huxley's *Island*, or Carlos Castañeda's books on Don Juan to understand how the mind-expanding drugs can be of immense benefit to the human condition. I spoke earlier about how, in the 1960s, I took LSD on quite a few occasions, up to the point where I realized what I had to do to develop my life – and I then had no further use for it. Since it has no addictive qualities, I simply stopped taking it. Personally, it was very beneficial to me in the sense that the enhanced awareness I obtained from the consciousness-altering aspect of taking LSD allowed me to see what action I needed to take in order to enhance my life.

I saw that if my music were to be enriched, then my interior life needed to be enriched. It is my personal conviction that I cannot have a poor interior life and a rich musical life.

***S&S* (David):** You've spoken eloquently about the spiritual power of music, John, and its potential for healing and connection, and it's well known that you followed a spiritual teacher yourself in the late 1960s/early 1970s. Would you be willing to share with our readers – many of whom would regard themselves as 'spiritual-seekers' – something of your own spiritual journey post the Sri Chinmoy years?

JM: I address this question to some degree above. I agree with you that music is a great power for peace and coexistence. I would even say that music has an advantage over religion in the sense that in a given concert hall you will find Catholics, Protestants, Hindus and Muslims all under the same roof, sharing a common happiness that can only be found in music.

I have to say that the word 'spiritual' bothers me. It refers to the Western convention of thought that there is 'the spiritual and the material', an abstract and artificial

division, whereas to my mind they are inseparable. Moreover, we are all beings of the spirit, born with all the highest attributes of love, wisdom etc., and the ways of enlightenment all point to the inner realization of these states of knowledge and awareness.

I began actively searching for some of these ways from around 1968 by accessing the library of the Theosophical Society in London, and from there to joining a meditation group. I also began practising Hatha Yoga.

By early 1969 I was in New York and already under the influence of the Master Hazrat Inayat Khan through his son Pir Vilayat Khan, who was largely responsible for bringing the Sufi traditions and message to the West. To me, Sufism is the loving heart of Islam, and it is regrettable that the face of Islam today has been so strongly identified with the violence of fundamentalism. By this time I was regularly practising Hatha Yoga, but after about a year and a half, I was still searching for 'something'. I realized that while my body had become very healthy, inside I was still the same person struggling to find my way in life.

I visited numerous Yogis and Yoginis, and one day was taken to see Sri Chinmoy at a lecture. Sri Chinmoy's way of meditation was called Bhakti Yoga, which is the way of devotion. At the end of his talk he invited questions from the audience, and I asked him to explain to me the relationship between enlightenment and music. He answered that while music was indeed related to enlightenment, a person didn't need to play music to become enlightened. He said that a street sweeper can become enlightened through sweeping the streets; everything depended on how he swept the streets. I was very intrigued by this answer, and eventually became one of his followers. It was here that began my first real work in meditation. Though I have to say that for the first two years, I was never given any indication of how to meditate. We were asked to meditate on a photo of the Guru himself in a transcendental state of consciousness. Even though I'd had no specific instruction, when you meditate regularly twice or more every day, eventually you begin to discover what is really going on in your mind – and this itself is very useful in terms of dealing with subconscious and conscious predilections.

After about five years, I found myself disagreeing with certain concepts of Sri Chinmoy, and realized that it was time to assume responsibility for my own enlightenment. In fact, after the rigour of five years of discipline, I enjoyed relaxing and digesting the previous five years. I became very focused on music itself, but I'd realized by then that my music had its roots in my very being, and was in fact nourished there. I should mention that during the last years with Sri Chinmoy, I'd also become aware of some of the great men who had a high degree of influence on my life. For example Ramana Maharshi, Ramakrishna and his two most illustrious disciples, Bramananda and Vivekananda. I subsequently made pilgrimages to the places where they had lived.

By the end of the 1980s I'd discovered Zen Buddhism through its predecessor, Chan. In fact, Chan Buddhism is the specifically Chinese version of Buddhism before it took root in Japan. In the end, I discovered that there were two aspects of meditation or contemplation that fitted my character: namely, the devotional aspect I'd learned with Guru Chinmoy, and the more subtle way of Zen or Chan Buddhism. These are the two aspects of my meditation practices, and depending on how I wake up in the morning, my meditation will proceed along one of these two lines.

***S&S* (David):** Thanks again, John, for such a full and open response.

Richard and I have decided to take editorial licence and allow ourselves one self-indulgent question each to you, in what is a wonderful opportunity for us as great admirers of your life's work. This is my most purely musical question, and if it's OK, I'd like to subdivide it into three parts (and I appreciate that some of this you may have covered in your responses to the previous questions): (a) Which guitarists most influenced you in your development as a guitar player? (b) Did you have formal music/guitar tuition, and if so, was there a particular guitar teacher who inspired you? (I note that Jimmy Page has cited you as one of his guitar teachers!); and (c) Who do you find yourself listening to these days? Is there an up-and-coming new John McLaughlin out there we should be listening out for?

JM: The guitarists who have had most influence on my playing and development are the Mississippi blues players of whom I speak above. Followed by the great flamenco guitarists. Django Reinhardt had a strong impact on me subsequently, and from there I discovered the jazz guitarist Tal Farlow, whom I really enjoyed. We're still in the 1950s here, and by the 1960s I was under a much greater influence of Miles Davis and John Coltrane. The influence of guitarists had disappeared until the advent of Jimi Hendrix. I equated the work of Jimi and Coltrane even though musically they were far apart. The thing is they were both searching for greater overtones in their sound. John Coltrane found it by changing his embouchure, and Jimi found it through the use of distortion. The actual effect was similar.

No, I never had any formal training on the guitar. By the time the guitar arrived, I'd had around four years of playing piano, reading music etc., so I was not a total neophyte. The truth is I fell absolutely in love with the guitar, and the record player was a great teacher. After about four years I went to a guitarist someone had recommended me to, to learn a more formal musical education, but actually all the teacher wanted to do was listen to me play the music I'd stolen from the Mississippi blues players years before, and of course I was only too happy to oblige. However, my mother soon found out, and objected to paying this guy two shillings and sixpence for nothing!

Today I listen to my heroes, Miles, Coltrane, but I basically live from day to day and wait for music to come to me. This is something I have no control over. Musically I cannot even say where I am headed, except what I am actively working on. The Fourth Dimension's 'Black Light' CD (goo.gl/609ogy) came out some months ago, and I'm happy with this recording. What I'm working on at the moment is a collaboration with singer Shankar Mahadevan on a project we're both thrilled with. It has been going on for some time now, almost two years, but we will have one piece finished by the end of the year. At least that's what we've promised each other. It's a completely new meeting of East and West, and very difficult to describe. When it's finished I will send you a copy of the piece. We have three pieces to do, but because of other commitments – Shankar is exceptionally busy – we'll try to finish the other two pieces next year.

***S&S* (Richard):** Thank you so much, John. And here's my personal 'question' – sorry it's a rather long one! I've already mentioned the extraordinary spiritual impact on me when I discovered your music in 1972 (though I take your earlier point about the problematic nature of the term 'spiritual').

Here's a little story. Soon after I'd bought and had become totally entranced by your Mahavishnu Orchestra's 'Inner Mounting Flame' album, I was in France on a

school field-trip – and as adolescent lads did then, all we were interested in when in Paris was the biggest record shop we could find! There, I was in shock and rapture when I came across three albums of yours – i.e. 'Extrapolation', 'Devotion' and 'My Goal's Beyond'. I'd not seen these albums anywhere in England, and I proceeded to borrow 'an arm and a leg' from my mates to buy all three – and of course I still have those self-same copies today.

What I still find staggering, John, is that in the space of just a couple of years (i.e. 1969–71), you made four absolutely sensational albums ('IMF' being the other one, of course) – all very different and unique; and having created just one of which albums, most musicians would have been more than happy to retire on the plaudits! And over this period you were also doing incredible work with Miles Davis and Tony Williams too (and I've not even mentioned your extraordinary album 'Where Fortune Smiles' from 1970 – which I discovered several years later).

As I said earlier, I've discovered since that time that there are many thousands of people across the globe who had a 'spiritual transformation' comparable to my own in relation to your music at that time – and as a transpersonal and 'cultural' psychologist, I find this fascinating. Thankfully, in Humanistic Psychology we explicitly acknowledge the importance of the spiritual and the transpersonal (unlike mainstream 'scientific' psychology), so it's fine to speak openly about these things in this journal!

I note that in 1970 you were 28 years of age; and being a close follower of Rudolf Steiner's spiritual cosmology, I immediately think of the deep significance of that age, which is also recognized in depth astrology. I also recall at the time (in *Melody Maker* magazine, 1972 – I still have the cutting) that you controversially said ' … God plays through me'. Now I know that in the vast majority of cases, such a statement would likely be seen as rather dubious, to say the least – but I have to say that I absolutely believe it to be true.

One other thought. From all the blogs, books, articles etc. that I've read over some 40+ years, my sense is that far more men than women connected deeply and identified with your spiritual path; and I wonder whether that might also be symptomatic (in part at least) of the comparative dearth of spiritual role models that we young men had available to us around that time (men's consciousness groups, and Robert Bly, Michael Meade etc. came later, of course). And yet perhaps there was (and still is) an enormous spiritual yearning amongst so many people who were/are profoundly dissatisfied with an overly consumerist, materialistic society.

So John, I end up wondering (as a psychologist as well as a music lover) what on earth was happening 'spiritually' around this time (1969–71), that so many people across the globe (and perhaps especially young men) connected with, and were so deeply affected by, your music, and by you as an individual. This isn't a simple question, I realize. But I wonder from these disparate remarks, what you might have to say now of that extraordinary period in your musical career, and what retrospective sense you might have made of it.

JM: First of all, thank you for those kind words ;-). In response to one of your earlier questions I spoke of the 1960s and its explosive creativity. For example the advent of Modal Jazz, a concept as powerful as Bebop Jazz in the 1940s and 1950s. Miles' recording 'Kind of Blue', which is considered today to be 'The Mona Lisa' of jazz. The recording by John Coltrane in 1964, 'A Love Supreme', which in one recording integrated the spiritual awareness of our connection to the Supreme Being. And then: The Beatles, LSD, James Brown,

Mohammed Ali and his suffering at the hands of the US government for refusing to go to the Vietnam War, Jimi Hendrix, Sly and the Family Stone, and finally a large segment of the 20-something generation, trying to find answers to the great questions of existence. And India and its fabulous contributions to the ways of enlightenment.

The list is huge … . To have been part of that generation gives me conflicting emotions. One – that I was, and am, part of that wave of creativity. Two – that we had such ideals for peace, and yet 50 years later look at the world we're leaving to our kids! It's a gigantic mess, so much hatred and intolerance, violence in our cities, drone bombing and that wonderful euphemism, 'collateral damage' … . What I truly believe, though, is that we're reaping the harvest of the horrific acts our grandparents and great grandparents committed against so many people, and these acts continue to be committed by the same governments today!

***S&S*:** That's quite a note to end on, John – and a sobering and important one in our humanistic journal, perhaps, given that our approach to psychology is sometimes accused of being over-idealistic and overly optimistic about the human condition.

It's surely one of the greatest highlights of this journal's 44-year history that you've done this wonderful interview for us, and we offer our heart-felt thanks and admiration to you for such generosity and open-heartedness in sharing such deep insights with our readers. We hope that this interview will also serve to bring your art and life's work to a worldwide audience through the journal's website; and as a part of that process, we're both delighted to include in this issue our own retrospective reviews of one of your iconic albums, 'My Goal's Beyond' (1971).

And finally, as the saying goes – 'Keep going ahead, John!'.

Disclosure statement

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the authors.

Notes on contributors

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 R&B scene, John then played in the USA with Tony Williams Lifetime and the legendary trumpeter Miles Davis. His Mahavishnu Orchestra (1971–75) 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 latest band The 4th Dimension is critically acclaimed as one of his most successful bands ever. A major influence on a number of prominent musicians, according to jazz guitarist Pat Metheny, 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.

Self & Society Editor Richard House with John in Edinburgh, July 2016.

Richard House and David Kalisch are co-editors of *Self & Society: An International Journal for Humanistic Psychology.*