

## RETRO REVIEW CLASSICS SPECIAL

(Mahavishnu) John McLaughlin, ‘My Goal’s Beyond’, Vinyl LP record, Douglas Records, 1971; now available on CD, Douglas AD-03, 2010 (see <http://goo.gl/LEnHba>); MP3 downloads available at 79p each track (<https://goo.gl/6Fbq8A>; MP3 full album for £7.49)



## Review I

Richard House

Co-editor, *Self & Society*

My endeavors in the spiritual life are like the tides . . . . It's not just about spirituality in music. It's about spirituality in life.

John McLaughlin (quoted in Kolosky, 2010, p. 17)

If I were choosing a piece of modern non-classical music that purveys a deep, entrancing spiritual ambience combined with musical virtuosity, creativity and an intrinsic healing quality, I would have to look very hard to find anything more accomplished or inspiring than legendary virtuoso guitarist John McLaughlin's album 'My Goal's Beyond' (hereafter, MGB), first released as an LP record in 1971, and subsequently on CD in 1982, 1987, 2000 and 2010 (and those are just the reissues I'm aware of). MGB is an album that is revered as an iconic classic by John McLaughlin's thousands of fans across the globe, and today, 45 years after its first release, it is more widely regarded as a masterpiece of modern music. Kolosky (2010, p. 19) writes of how 'fans . . . were . . . enchanted by just how beautiful . . . McLaughlin could make an acoustic guitar sound. His exacting jazz chords, clean fleet-fingered runs, and subtle harmonic nuances showed a mastery of the guitar that wasn't known at the time'.

One only has to look on the Amazon website to discover that this CD is scarce and hard to obtain, with a very high current price-tag (as I write, over £46, and that for a 43-minute CD – see <https://goo.gl/AygcjJ>). Thankfully, with some searching one *can* find cheaper second-hand vinyl versions (the original 1971 album – of which I'm very fortunate to have a copy – was reissued in vinyl in 1982 by Elektra/Asylum). It's a delight for me to review here a record that continues to thrill and move me today just as much as when I first bought it, all of 44 years ago.

I should declare that, unlike my co-editor David (who is also reviewing MGB for this issue), I am not a musician, so this is a subjective layperson's review, and not one informed by much technical musical understanding. Not that this should necessarily devalue what I have to say, but it just makes this review different from one informed by the understandings that come from being a musician. I suspect that for similar reasons, this review will also be more socially and culturally contextual, and more derivative, than David's.

In brief, the album consists of two very different sides: one, an almost entirely unaccompanied acoustic set of eight pieces, which pay close tribute to McLaughlin's then influences – Django Reinhardt, John Coltrane, Miles Davis, Charles Mingus and Bill Evans; and the second side consisting of two extended West-meets-East compositions, with two long tracks (titled 'Peace One' and 'Peace Two') intricately fusing Indian rhythms and drones, deliciously enmeshed with jazz flights from saxophone, flute, violin and drums, and with McLaughlin's endlessly inventive, yet sparing and always tasteful acoustic lines straddling the line between Eastern (India) and Western (jazz) influences. 'Western in structure but Eastern in atmosphere' (Kolosky, 2010, p. 23), 'Peace One' and 'Peace Two' also feature, among others, several of the musicians who would soon become fellow members of legendary jazz-fusion band the Mahavishnu Orchestra, formed by John in the same year.

With its pioneering West–East motif, MGB prefigures and anticipates World Music by more than a decade, with McLaughlin at the leading edge, as always, in a musical career that now spans well over five decades. And in terms of mood, MGB is a highly spiritual and ethereal-mystical creation, at once both gentle and soothing, and yet paradoxically also possessing a viscerally emotional intensity – the kind of spiritual urgency that’s a hallmark of McLaughlin’s music, and which I, for one, have always found utterly entrancing and profoundly transformational.

When reading other reviews of this album, terms that keeps recurring are ‘masterpiece’, ‘modern classic’ and ‘musical milestone’ – and to me it’s indeed inconceivable that MGB should *not* be considered a masterpiece, in anyone’s parlance. It’s scarcely believable that music of such spiritual depth and sensitivity, virtuosic brilliance and visionary trans-culturalism can have been made by someone under the age of 30 – yet this is just one of the towering achievements of John McLaughlin’s MGB. His biographer Paul Stump graphically describes the contemporary impact of MGB, writing of how, ‘Revealed as a [finger] picker, amidst this hailstorm of notes, the guy [JM] either had to be a fraud or a sensation. History ... and the judgement of his peers elected him as a 24-carat sensation’ (Stump, 2000, p. 57).

What comes across to me on MGB is the musician’s total dedication to his art – and this coheres closely with a story I read about John some decades ago. It described how, at the start of his career, John had played a gig and got back very late to his hotel room with a fellow musician, who proceeded to go to bed, leaving John sitting on his bed practising his guitar. When the other musician woke up early in the morning, he was incredulous to find John *still* sitting on his bed, practising. When he asked John what on earth he was doing, John apparently replied, ‘... There isn’t much time’. I’m telling this from memory, and it might be an apocryphal story, but for me it sums John up as a master musician who is totally and single-mindedly dedicated to his art, and to reaching the fullest of his own potential – a theme that will be dear to readers of this journal, and to the humanistic ethos in general. There is something very special about this degree of dedication, with which I’m sure all true artists will identify. In his liner notes to the 1982 Elektra reissue, McLaughlin himself writes that ‘My Goal’s Beyond was, and indeed still is, a very important album to me. It stems from a love of the acoustic guitar and was my first attempt to show its natural beauty.’

Another way in which MGB is often described is as being equally enjoyable as either background music or music to which one devotes one’s full attention (one perceptive reviewer has described MGB as ‘at once both light and heavy’). While it almost seems sacrilegious to me to imagine MGB as background music, there *is* a sense in which truly great, transcendent music should perhaps be flexible in this way across diverse environments and settings. Certainly, I really can imagine MGB being perfect, quietly healing music to have playing in one’s clients’ therapy waiting room. Indeed, were I still practising as a therapist, I could hardly imagine a better investment for my clients’ well-being!

It’s easy to sample each of the album tracks for free online (see the link at the start of this review), and with MP3 downloads available at just 79 pence for each track, one can buy whole tracks cheaply before committing to buying the whole album. I would start with ‘Peace Two’, Mingus’s ‘Goodbye Pork Pie Hat’, ‘Something Spiritual’ and John’s own classic composition ‘Follow Your Heart’; and if you love these tracks like I

and many others do, then perhaps MGB will become ‘a must’ to add to your collection.

Readers will likely already have read our interview with the great man in this issue of the journal (see pp. 355–371), and I hope that the interview, combined with these retro reviews by David and myself, will encourage you to explore the *oeuvre* of one of the world’s greatest living musicians. And if you have been so enthused, and are questing for The Beyond through music, you could do no better than to begin by procuring this extraordinary record, and opening yourself to its timeless transcendent beauty. Let’s leave the last word with the leading authority on McLaughlin, Walter Kolosky:

McLaughlin was the first acoustic guitarist to add Indian and Western fusion to the jazz standards. In that sense, *My Goal’s Beyond* was the first of its kind and remains timeless because of it . . . . [It] set standards for acoustic guitar playing which remain today. McLaughlin’s soloing and chord playing was [sic] a revelation . . . . His playing was amazingly fast, yet still melodic . . . . His own compositions were thrilling, reflective and meditative. He was coming from an entirely new place. He *was* the new place.

(Kolosky, 2010, pp. 17–18)

## References

- Kolosky, W. (2010). *Follow your heart: John McLaughlin song by song – a listener’s guide*. Cary, NC: Abstract Logix Books.
- Stump, P. (2000). *Go ahead John: The music of John McLaughlin*. London: SAF Publishing.

## Review II

David Kalisch

Co-editor, *Self & Society*

The oft-asked question ‘Who’s the greatest guitarist of all time?’ makes for an entertaining pub debate, but easily gets tiresome when taken too seriously. ‘Great’ at what, for whom and when? *De gustibus . . .*, as the Romans would say.

But having said that, there’s no question that John McLaughlin must rank as one of the finest guitarists in the jazz and jazz-fusion genres that this country has so far produced. And ‘My Goal’s Beyond’ (hereafter MGB) helped to cement a reputation that was already well on the way to becoming solidly established through John’s prior work, particularly with Tony Williams and jazz giant Miles Davis. It’s also a great reference point in his work, showcasing aspects of his unique musicianship and instrumental virtuosity, while also previewing two separate trails that were to become figural, both in subsequent work of his and in the wider jazz-fusion/‘World’ music fields.

Many folk, including the present reviewer, somewhat prefer John’s acoustic to his electric work – a preference that may extend to other guitar genres; and this album is the perfect starting place for exploring John’s unique acoustic guitar style. It helps that on MGB, John gets a particularly sonorous and tasty acoustic sound which works

equally well in the slower melodic passages and also in the more rapid-fire flamenco-influenced percussive passages that are such a feature of his style: jazz picados.

The opening two tracks – ‘Peace One’ and ‘Peace Two’ – are band numbers featuring drums, percussion, bass, saxophone and flute – the kind of line-up with which, in its electric version, John was simultaneously trailblazing in the form of the Mahavishnu Orchestra. But by going acoustic here and treating the guitar at times almost as another percussion instrument, and at other times reeling off lines of raga-influenced scales that make his guitar sound very sitar-like, in these two tracks, the latter of which is a particularly satisfying and coherent blend of Indian, Arabic, flamenco and jazz sounds and modes, John was also blazing a trail that would later flower in the band Shakti in the mid-1970s (for which luthier Abraham Wechter specially designed the famous ‘Shakti’ sitar-guitar).

Contrasting with these two longer tracks are the remaining eight shorter compositions featuring John on solo guitar, with some overdubbed rhythm guitar also played by John. Given the contrast, the album could well have sounded bitty and fragmented, and the fact that it doesn’t is a tribute to a consistent mood of intensely serious playfulness that John brings to proceedings, as well as to the overall attitude of the music, well described by Miles Davis speaking of John as ‘far in’.

But the other thing going on here is precisely a series of tributes, of homages and respects being made and paid, with a choice of tracks reading like a ‘who’s who’ of modern jazz. The eight shorter tracks start – and this can hardly be accidental – with John’s solo version of the great Charles Mingus’s ‘Goodbye Pork Pie Hat’ – from Mingus’s most iconic and personal album, ‘Mingus Ah Um’, itself a tribute to the great saxophonist Lester Young (who had cut his teeth in the Count Basie Orchestra). In other words, it’s a harking back to a harking back that itself is a harking back to the classical age of jazz.

And the fingerprints of the past are all over this album – revolutionary, as it also was at the time, to cut an album of acoustic and mostly solo jazz guitar (remember, we are at the time still very much of the Hendrix–Clapton–Led Zeppelin era!). The fingerprints in question being especially those of Mingus and Miles. It was Miles who told John to ‘Go out and form your own band’, which led to the Mahavishnu Orchestra, and here John is taking further steps, both with a band and on his own, to start to forge his own legacy, and in so doing, respects have to be paid. So track 4 is John’s version of his contemporary, Chick Corea’s composition ‘Waltz for Bill Evans’; so again, John paying tribute to a tribute (Evans and Corea both played keyboards at different times in Miles Davis’s bands). And of course the tributes could flow in either direction: in an astonishing gesture of respect, Miles had already composed the song ‘John McLaughlin’ for Miles’s landmark ‘Bitches Brew’ album.

So as much as anything else, what is being established here is John’s place in the American jazz lineage. Thus, it’s somehow natural that after a couple of John’s own compositions, he should end the set with Miles’s own ‘Blue in Green’ from the most iconic, and some would say greatest, of all modern jazz albums, ‘Kind of Blue’.

But as indicated earlier, as well as signposting the immediate jazz past and its history, MGB also pointed forwards to John’s post-Sri Chinmoy but still very Indian-influenced Shakti phase and the advent of World Music, where John’s personal (his accent sounds like an amalgam of every country he’s passed through) and musical multi-culturalism would shine through; and also – via the huge rebirth of acoustic guitar music which he here helped to initiate – to another new fusion music which

he helped to birth (along with Paco de Lucia, Larry Coryell and Al di Meola) and render authentic – flamenco jazz /nuevo flamenco – which flowered in the very successful Guitar Trio, collaborations between John and Paco, and of course centrally in de Lucia's own very fine body of work.

So in what is very much a foundational crossroads album, you have astonishing boldness here: John, by implication, declaring his place in a jazz lineage that runs from Count Basie through Lester Young to Miles and Mingus; and doing, essentially, a solo acoustic jazz album when no one else is doing solo acoustic jazz. And alongside this, not just the appropriate paying of respects where respects are due, but the fact that John at this time is a serious follower of the Hindu guru Sri Chinmoy, dedicates this album to him, and for which Sri Chinmoy himself provides the original liner notes.

So great boldness, imagination and self-confidence married to, and stemming from, the most virtuosic of guitar techniques on the one hand, and great modesty, loyalty (devotion and surrender?) on the other. A winning combination that has seen John through in every variety of combination where his musicianship and ability to blend in as well as to excel have enabled him to have his own bands in which individuals are encouraged to shine (exactly as they were in his great mentor Miles Davis's bands); and also seen him always able to hold his own and more in tandem with other great 'stars': Carlos Santana, Chick Corea, Larry Coryell and perhaps most successfully with the Guitar Trio, whose music bears out Segovia's remark, and I deliberately misquote here: 'There is only one thing more beautiful than the sound of a guitar: the sound of three guitars'.

Looking back to this whole period of creative experimentation in which novelty, risk-taking, exploration and adventure were sovereign (reminiscent of the early days of Humanistic Psychology!), some would say that the jazz-rock fusion genre era, despite it being replete with great music and fantastic musicians, much of it now sounds 'of its time', and with marginal contemporary appeal. Often this is due precisely to its lack of moorings (is this jazz/rock/flamenco/'world'?) which, combined with instrument technologies that now at times sound horribly dated, can today make much of this fine musical material sound soulless rather than 'spiritual'.

This brings us back to MGB which, despite the album title, guru connections and titles like 'Peace One' and 'Two' and 'Something Spiritual', sounds to my ears at least mercifully un-spiritual – or if it *is* spiritual, then it's solidly down to earth as well. I don't particularly warm to music that is avowedly or self-referentially spiritual (other than, obviously, great classical music written for church purposes – which in any case is rightly called 'religious' music); and I certainly don't enjoy a lot of New Agey stuff that's meant to smell of the Orient etc. But what I love about MGB is that it's not like that, and yet to look at it, you might think it was going to be! And played as it is on John's superb acoustic, with compositions firmly grounded in the jazz tradition, it remains timeless and fresh, and offers something on each replaying.

If John's goal was 'beyond', he's certainly made it – to nearly 50 years beyond its release date: no small achievement in an age where everything solid melts into air.

Whether the young guitar genius who was evacuated to Doncaster at an early age actually succeeded in placing himself in the line running from Duke Ellington and Count Basie to Charles Mingus and Miles Davis/John Coltrane, we'll know in another 50 years' time. But on this record, John's goal is perhaps an altogether quieter, more modest and inward one, and we can say with reasonable confidence that he does and did succeed in placing himself squarely in a line that runs from

Django Reinhardt through Charlie Christian and Wes Montgomery, to the likes of Barney Kessel, Joe Pass, Jim Hall, Tal Farlow, John Schofield and then to Larry Coryell and himself. As John himself said recently, 'I'm just a guitarist'. But what a guitarist!

In a 2002 retro review of MGB, Walter Kolosky ends by recommending playing the album 'once a month for the rest of your life'. I'm not sure John would go along with something quite that prescriptive, but play it a few times (its appeal is not necessarily instant), and I believe you'll want to keep playing it.