

## Renowned British Jazz Guitarist John McLaughlin Speaks out on the Place of Drugs in Modern Society

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### Abstract

The authors report on an exclusive interview held in 2016 with the virtuoso jazz-fusion guitarist John McLaughlin, in which McLaughlin speaks courageously and openly about his experience of drugs in relation to his own creative art, music and about the views he has reached about the place that drugs should have in society stemming from his experiences. The interview ranges over issues that include society's confused understanding of the nature and definition of "drugs" and the differentiation of different kinds of drugs, including so-called "consciousness-raising drugs". McLaughlin also shares his forthright views about the appropriate, nuanced attitude that society should take to drug-taking, including the frank view that "prohibition has never worked and never will".

**Keywords:** John McLaughlin; Music; Drugs; LSD; Mescaline; Levels of consciousness; 1960s counter-culture; Creativity

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### Introduction

As co-editors of the Humanistic Psychology journal *Self & Society* [1], last year as we write the authors had the great pleasure and privilege of interviewing one of the world's greatest living musicians, British jazz-fusion guitarist John McLaughlin [2]. In what became a wide-ranging, in-depth interview [3-8] McLaughlin, now in his 76<sup>th</sup> year, spoke openly and courageously about his experience of how his engagement with drugs influenced his creative art in his early career and thence to share his forthright views on the place of drugs in modern society.

In this somewhat unusual article, we set out below the key questions and answers that emerged from this path-breaking interview, together with a light accompanying commentary. We have done our best to stay true to the spirit of McLaughlin's answers to our questions, but we urge readers to consult the original published interview for John's actual words [2]. In our view, the interview amply demonstrates the thoughtful, nuanced thinking that we believe to be essential if society is to reach a mature, informed position on the place of drugs in society [9].

### The Interview

In the interview itself, drugs first came up when Richard asked McLaughlin the following question:

"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 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 another."

In reply, referring to the counter-cultural 1960s, John answered at some length. He first referred to how he and some other fellow musicians started to take hallucinogens – for example, LSD, mescaline and other mind-expanding substances. For McLaughlin, these hallucinogens opened the mind to other levels of consciousness, the main result of which was what he refers to as "the bringing to awareness of the great existential questions of life" – for example, questions about personal identity, and the nature of God and the infinite Universe in which we exist, and why.

He pointed out that such questions have exercised humankind for some thousands of years in China and India, and in these cultures quite specific approaches have been developed for finding the correct answers to such questions that bring some light. McLaughlin describes how this was certainly true in his

case, and that it was a quite natural move for him and his fellow questing musicians to turn to India and China to try to find the right responses to these deep existential questions.

This fascinating answer led us to ask John a further, more specific question about drugs and their relationship to music and the creative process itself. We pointed out that there exist interesting and revealing parallels between music and psychotherapy in the realm of drugs, with therapists like Dr Stanislav Grof practising “LSD Psychotherapy” back in the 1970s. McLaughlin’s own explicit disavowal of drugs in the early 1970s was an inspiration to many. And yet, we continued, some extraordinary music has arguably been drug-inspired – we suggested Jimi Hendrix as a paradigm example of this phenomenon. We ended our question by asking McLaughlin to reflect on these issues, including how he came to disavow drugs at a time when just about everyone else on the music scene in the late 1960s and early 1970s was doing them.

Our reference to the meeting of drugs and psychotherapy in the work of the pioneering transpersonal psychotherapist Grof [10] merits further consideration here. Grof is just one of a number of authorities who have published reputable texts on LSD psychotherapy; and it is interesting that there is currently a major renaissance in the field of LSD psychotherapy [11-18]. We were delighted with the openness and honesty with which McLaughlin answered what, for many, would surely be a very challenging and complex question.

In his fulsome reply, he began by saying that there exists “a fundamental problem” in today’s attitude to drugs. In his view, the term ‘drug’ itself is an obscure one, which in present-day society often possesses ominous overtones. ‘The perception of drugs is also confused’, he continued, as in reality society actually uses drugs everywhere for healing, in addition to their use for ‘recreational’ purposes. So we have a situation in which so-called “good” drugs save lives, help people towards health and/or cure and which are therefore pretty much universally welcome and approved of by societies. Indeed, he continued, recreational drugs like marijuana are being increasingly recognized for their innate ‘medicinal’ properties, thus losing their ‘evil’ reputation. He pointed out further than it’s well known that marijuana is much less harmful to humans than is alcohol.

Moving on to the so-called ‘hard’ drugs, principally heroin and cocaine, both of which induce temporary feelings of pleasure, contentment, etc.: such drugs are also killer drugs because addiction to heroin and cocaine in particular is both swift and merciless. McLaughlin described having lost dear friends (musicians) to these drugs, and stated that he’d been strongly against them since the 1960s. But he also recognizes that these drugs are here to stay – after all, there’s a market for them. He finds it ‘incomprehensible’ that governments have routinely adopted their ‘head in the sand’ attitude to these drugs. For him, their common slogan, “Just say no to drugs”, is ‘a farce’. People in general (and certainly in America) are the first to say that ‘nobody has the right to tell me what I can or cannot take’; and this results in a huge underground market for heroine, and especially for cocaine.

For McLaughlin, the policy of prohibition has never worked – and it never will. He argued that governments need to realize that people will continue to take every possible kind of drug whether they’re legal or not, thus leaving the whole field wide open to drug lords and criminals. He predicts that at some point in the future, governments will have no choice but to legalize all drugs, with strict accompanying quality control. For McLaughlin, perhaps the main problem is that governments simply don’t discriminate between drugs that are very useful, and those that are addictive – which, apart from the ‘high’ they confer, are essentially absolutely useless. And yet all are lumped together and treated as criminal – including the ones he mentioned next – the non-addictive drugs like payote-mescaline, ‘magic mushrooms’ and the more synthetic (but just as potent) LSD. These powerfully alter consciousness, he pointed out – or the power to enable people to access levels of awareness which is otherwise hard to access. He referenced Aldous Huxley’s ‘Island’ and Carlos Castañeda’s Don Juan books for understanding how these mind-expanding drugs can be of great benefit to the human condition. Taking LSD in the 1960s helped McLaughlin realize that what he needed to do was develop his life – from which time onwards he had no further use for it. LSD’s non-addictive qualities enabled him to simply stop taking it.

It was in fact, McLaughlin insisted, very beneficial to him in that the enhanced awareness he gained from the consciousness-altering aspect of LSD-taking enabled him to see what action was needed in order for him to enhance his life. McLaughlin ended this part of the interview by saying, “I saw that if my music were to be enriched, then my interior life needed to be enriched. It’s my personal conviction that I cannot have a poor interior life and a rich musical life.”

In our view, the issue of drugs should always be located within a wider cultural context, and it was interesting that McLaughlin ended his interview with us by saying that he was emotionally conflicted about the 1960s. First, there was his being part of that extraordinary wave of creativity. He and his fellow questers had such ideals for peace at the time; and yet now, 50 years later, “look at the world we are leaving to our kids! It’s a gigantic mess...” he said.

For his final comment, McLaughlin said: ‘What I truly believe is that we are 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!’

## Conclusion

McLaughlin is certainly not one for politically correct fence-sitting – which is why we think what this highly intelligent and thoughtful virtuoso musician has to say about the place of drugs in modern society deserves serious consideration in this important journal. Indeed, we believe that there is a strong case for people of McLaughlin’s experience, insight and thoughtfulness to have a major input into discussions leading to the intelligent reform of existing drug laws in Western societies [2].

It's a strange thought that drug policy should in the main be made, pronounced upon and enacted without the input of people who have actually had experience with different classes of drugs, and all the discernment and insight that such experience brings.

Someone like John McLaughlin, and many other musicians and many others who have used drugs, would add so much intelligence and wisdom to a debate and policy on drugs that is otherwise stuck in the moribund realms of what is essentially a "moral panic" [19,20].

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