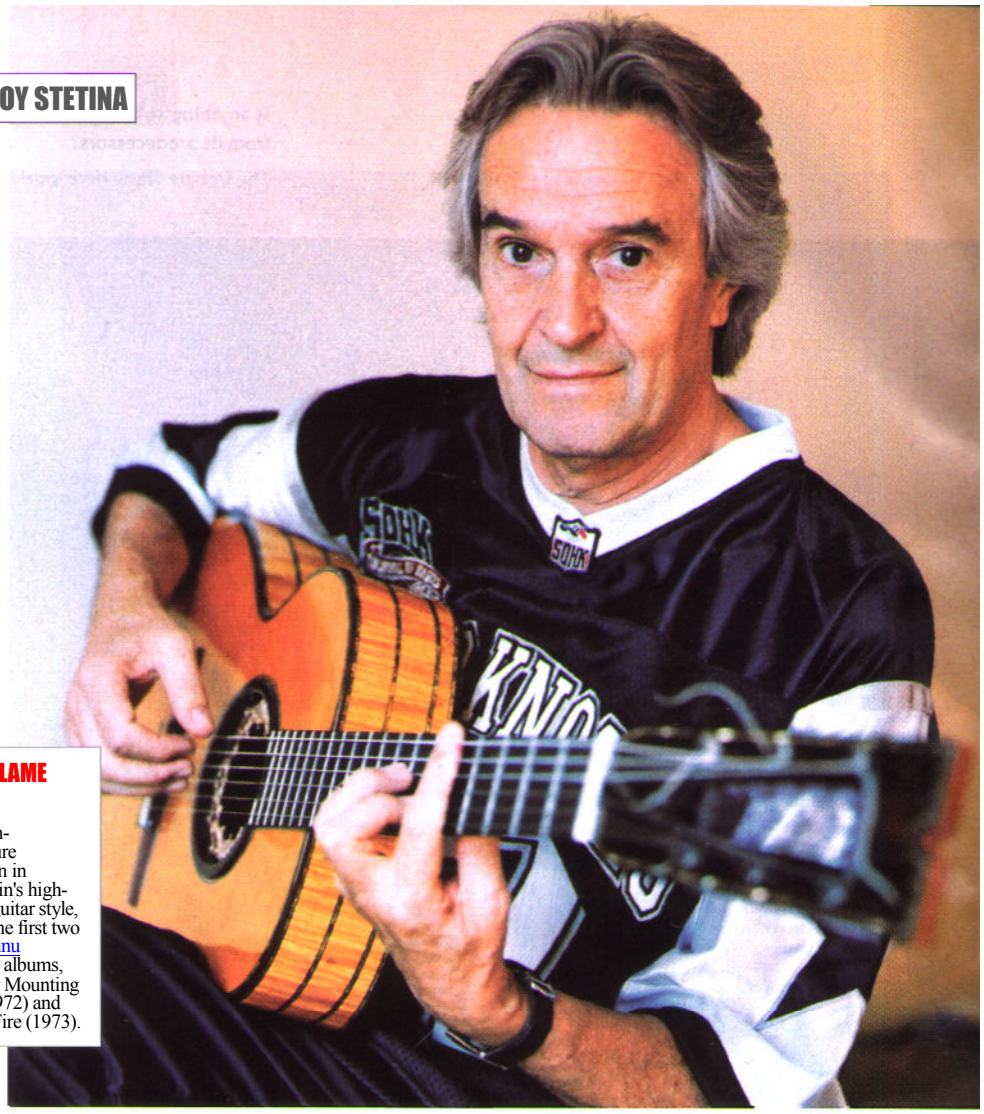
BY TROY STETINA

John McLaughlin

A Study in Target Notes



John McLaughlin came to prominence in the late '60s with jazz great Miles Davis, but it was his leadership of the fusion supergroup Mahavishnu Orchestra in the '70s that really made him a guitar icon. Blending technical virtuosity with rock, jazz, and Eastern influences, Mahavishnu's small handful of albums were both highly influential and commercially successful.

McLaughlin has made numerous recordings since, including his newest CD, Industrial Zen (Verve). Fig. 1 is a fusion lick based on that album's "To Bop or Not to Be." Played slowly, it may sound odd to those unfamiliar with jazz harmony. But crank up the tempo and suddenly the whole lick comes alive. What sounded aimless before has now become a series of quick ear tweaks that alternately attach and detach from the main tonality.

The key to getting this lick down is charting its target notes. Once you've located a target, play it, along with the notes leading up to it, a few times, until you have the sequence memorized. Then try the next portion. After you've gotten a few of these sequences down, string them together and push the tempo. The first target note in our figure is A, at the start of beat 2. All of beat 1 is approach—rising up three notes, then skipping above, and falling back to, the target. Notice how beat 3, similarly, is an approach to the Db at beat 4. During beat 4, the phrase moves chromatically up to its target note, E, which occurs at the start of measure 2. Beats 1 and 2 of that measure target the F at beat 3. From there we head up to the Bb, at beat 4. Try using your ear to identify the rest of the target notes yourself.

In this example, the harmonic structure is fairly straight, though at times it seems to come unhinged. Measure 1 is C Dorian (C-D-Eb-F-G-¬A-Bb), with some chromatic lubrication, while measure 2 toys with C Mixolydian (C-D-E-F-¬G-A-Bb). The tail end of measure 3 is in C major (C-D-E-F-G-A-B), while measure 4 features the C whole-tone scale (C-D-E-F#-G#-A#). The lick finishes up back in solid C-minor territory, with the C minor pentatonic scale (C-Eb-F-G-Bb). And all this in just over five measures!

If you want to develop the chops for this kind of playing, you may be interested in Mclaughlin's comprehensive instructional DVD This Is the Way I Do It, available at abstractlogix.com

FROM FLAME TO FIRE

For a high-temperature immersion in Mclaughlin's high-velocity guitar style, listen to the first two Mahavishnu Orchestra albums, The Inner Mounting Flame (1972) and Birds of Fire (1973).

TRACK 26 ON THE CD • ALL EXAMPLES ON VIDEO

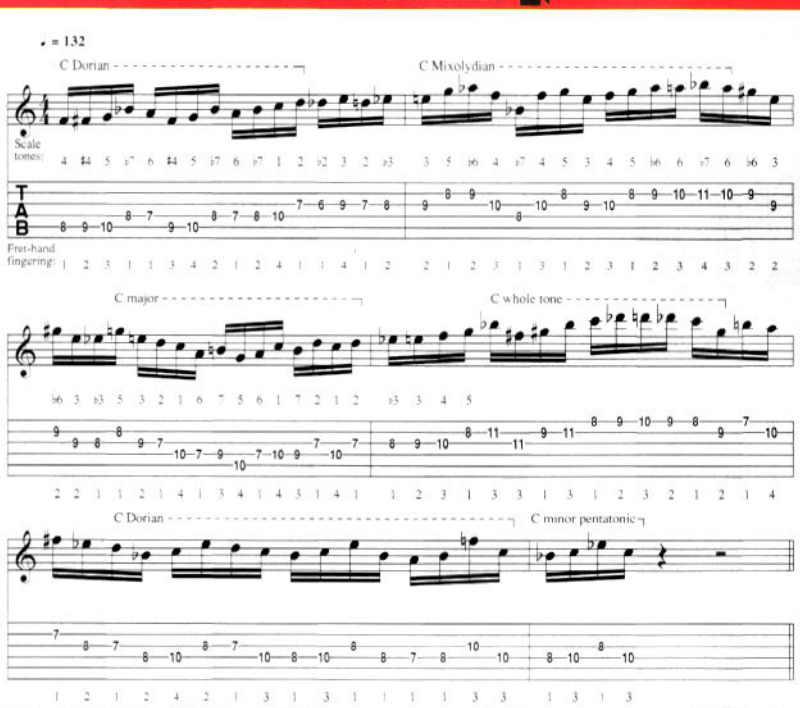



FIG 1 26