



Gregg Bendian

by Bill Milkowski

Since the early '90s, drummer Gregg Bendian has distinguished himself as an adventurous and accomplished player-composer through his sideman work with the likes of Derek Bailey, Cecil Taylor, Ornette Coleman, John Zorn, Peter Brötzmann and Pat Metheny while also leading his own Interzone Quartet and Trio Pianissimo. His most recent recording is the startlingly virtuosic solo drum project *Research*, on his own Aggregate Music label. But Bendian's most passionate undertaking in recent years has been his Mahavishnu Project (MP), the band he formed in 2001 to tackle the extreme technical demands of recreating and interpreting the incendiary music of the Mahavishnu Orchestra.

Bendian says his fascination the repertoire of McLaughlin and the Mahavishnu Orchestra is no different than jazz musicians today playing the music of Miles, Monk and Coltrane. "The Mahavishnu music, the electric Miles stuff and Tony Williams Lifetime along with Weather Report and Return To Forever...this is the music that spoke to my generation first and that got us interested in jazz. I'm sorry if Lincoln Center or Ken Burns don't come out and embrace this stuff as part of the whole continuum, but it doesn't mean that it shouldn't be played and we shouldn't take it seriously. Certainly, no one can discount the importance of *Kind of Blue*. Similarly, can anyone discount the importance of *Bitches Brew* or *Inner Mounting Flame* or *Birds of Fire*? I don't think so."

The current edition of the MP - keyboardist Neil Alexander, guitarist Chad McLoughlin, violinist Zach Brock and bassist Jim Cammack - will perform classic Mahavishnu material, along with rarities from the John McLaughlin songbook, at the fourth annual Vishnufest, held this month at Le Poisson Rouge. "This is the first time that we will be performing music from John's solo albums - *Extrapolation*, *Devotion*, *Electric Guitarist* and *Electric Dreams* - along with the usual Mahavishnu Orchestra repertoire of tunes... But the big surprise for the program is the first performance in 35 years of John McLaughlin's music for a cappella choir. I have put together a group called the Vishnu Voices, made up of some of New York's finest classical singers. This was done with the help of Melissa Stylianou, my usual singer when we do music from *Visions of the Emerald Beyond*. When I first began thinking about doing this I asked Melissa if it would be possible and her immediate response was, 'I can get you plenty of singers that would be into it.' So I basically got members from the choir of the [Saint Peter's] jazz church. They've sung together and they totally get the music."

McLaughlin wrote the nine vocal pieces when he was working with his spiritual guru Sri Chinmoy in a meditation center in Queens from 1972-75. They were sung by an amateur group that was made up of mostly disciples at that time and haven't been sung since then. The scores came into Bendian's hands a couple of years ago. As he explains, "The woman who was the

librarian for the group still is at the center in Queens and she just handed these scores off to me a couple of years ago, thinking, 'You might want to have them because you're a completionist,' which I am. I have an archive of stuff that John doesn't have and this was yet another thing that he didn't have. The pieces are very interesting. They run the gamut from sort of early music Renaissance kind of style, like [16th century liturgical composer Giovanni Pierluigi Da] Palestrina to more modern harmonic stuff that hints at John's writing for, say, *Apocalypse*."

Through his involvement with the Mahavishnu Project, Bendian has maintained close contact with McLaughlin and has also gotten the blessing of all five original members of the Mahavishnu Orchestra. "Pretty much from the beginning, John's attitude has been, 'Whatever you want to do with the Mahavishnu Project is just fine with me.'"

Ironically, it was McLaughlin reaching out to Bendian in 2003 that first brought them together. "His wife Ina contacted me back then and told me, 'John is very flattered that you're doing this ensemble. He'd really like to hear it. Can you please send us the CD?' Apparently, one of the super-fans had alerted her to us and by that time [the MP's first official recording] *Live Bootleg* was out. And while he heard about us, he had not heard us. So I told Ina, 'Of course, I'll send it.' Meanwhile, I'm shaking in my boots thinking, 'This is it. He's going to send a 'Cease and Desist' letter after he hears this.' Because I had no idea what his attitude was toward the music.

"He listened to it and that's when he first gave us the reaction and the quote that we still use today, where he thanked us for bringing the music back to life and commented on how great the band sounded and how amazing we were to do this stuff as well as we're doing it. And that was sort of the turning point for the group because previous to that people always came up to us and said, 'Well, what does John think of this? Is John cool? Are you guys cool with John?' And his endorsement really validated the band in a huge sense."

Likewise, the other original members eventually came on board with the Mahavishnu Project. "I had given copies of our CDs to [drummer] Billy Cobham and initially there was some skepticism on his part. But eventually he came around and is now positive about the band. [Keyboardist] Jan Hammer has been very supportive. He and [bassist] Rick Laird saw us playing the entire *Inner Mounting Flame* at the first Vishnufest. Jan got up on stage afterwards, as John had the night before and addressed the audience saying, 'This is a great pleasure and honor to be here and hear this happening. These guys are continuing what we were doing.' At that point, if there was any doubt in my mind that we were doing the right thing, it was gone. I knew that we had their full approval. And things sort of changed for the band after that. People started taking us more seriously after that." ♦

For more information, visit mahavishnuproject.com. The VishnuFest is at Le Poisson Rouge Jul. 7th-8th. See Calendar.

Recommended Listening:

- Cecil Taylor - *In Florescence* (A&M, 1989)
- Gregg Bendian - *Definite Pitch* (Aggregate, 1989)
- Peter Brötzmann/William Parker/Gregg Bendian - *Sacred Scrape - Secret Response* (Rastascan, 1992)
- Gregg Bendian's Interzone - *Requiem for Jack Kirby* (Atavistic, 2000)
- Gregg Bendian's Trio Pianissimo - *Change* (Aggregate Music, 2005)
- Mahavishnu Project - *Return to the Emerald Beyond* (Cuneiform, 2006)

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