

April 6, 2014

A whole new dimension



The Hindu

The Fourth Dimension led by jazz guitarist John McLaughlin performing at The Music Academy. Photo: R. Ravindran.

Infectious energy and distinctive tunes marked John McLaughlin and the Fourth Dimension's concert at The Music Academy

Tonal colours and rich textures found favour with the packed audience every time guitar-great John McLaughlin and members of The Fourth Dimension plunged into uncharted musical territory at the jazz event organised by *The Hindu* and The Shakti Foundation.

The concert, held in aid of medical care for the less privileged from rural areas, marked the band's Indian debut. The evening began with a prayer song by Vasanth Raghuvir of The Shakti Foundation followed by the lighting of the kuthuvilakku by mandolin maestro, U. Shrinivas.

Then, led by McLaughlin, the band — Etienne Mbappe (bass guitar), Gary Husband (keyboard and drums) and Ranjit Barot (drums) — burst forth with a collaborative energy that created a tempest of sound over the next hour and a half. At 72, the virtuoso guitarist still has a beatific smile that little belies the exhilarating music at his fingertips or the heroic strength he plays with. A prophet of fusion flagships for the past 40 years, McLaughlin's solos ranged from the calmer music of his early years to the marvels of speed he achieved even while introducing tremolos.

'Raju' from his 2008 album *Floating Point* set the evening rolling with Husband's outpouring on the keyboard and McLaughlin's frenetic fretwork turning out a dazzling profusion of sound. Husband is that rare artiste who plays both keyboard and drums with aplomb and excels not merely technically but also emotively. A professional on both instruments since the age of 13, Husband oscillated between the two, lending elasticity to the music.

The band moved on to ‘Little Miss Valley’ from McLaughlin’s 1994 album *Tokyo Live*, with its bluesy tones and Mbappe’s guitar chops. Mbappe, a Parisian of Cameroonian descent, is an exceptionally gifted bassist with tremendous creativity and an incredible sense of rhythm that draws from his African heritage. Mbappe played his parts with hazy abstraction defying the speed of jazz standards.

This was followed by a tribute to another guitar great — Carlos Santana. McLaughlin raced through the samba ‘Senor C.S.’ alternating between Latino beats and articulated runs, ending with hi-hat crashes.

Next up was a tribute to the inspiration for The Shakti Foundation — Velan Raghuvir. The band sang and played ‘Love and Understanding’, with Barot taking the lead. Barot’s strong roots in Indian classical music have helped him accentuate melody and rhythm from other genres with finesse. His drum solos had everything — pace, energy and surprise with some pitch-perfect, breathless konnakol.

The band then turned the page with ‘Light At The Edge of The World’, a slow piece that showcased every instrument and musician in streams of melody. ‘The Fine Line’ set off a war of drums with both Barot and Husband piling on layer upon layer of beats, interacting with each other’s form and ending in cymbal crashes (literally too as the frenzied momentum brought down a few drum kit components).

The concert ended with The Shakti Foundation’s theme song, ‘We Are The World’. But before that the band played a couple of more pieces, improvising feverishly and rounding them off in a never-ending fizz. The Fourth Dimension often turned out to be jazz’s champion racers — fast and harmonically adept, they sprinted their way to the finish to generous applause. But the band also remembered to stop along the way to spread the message of love and music from the soul.