

John Abercrombie tribute for Facebook  
By Steve Silberman

To say that John Abercrombie, who was born on this day in 1944, is one of my favorite musicians would be an understatement. I have more than 800 of the late jazz guitarist's recordings – both official and unofficial -- in my music library, and I've been listening to his music almost every day for nearly 45 years. I still discover new things in his music every time I hear it: nuances of emotion, subtleties of swing, ways to drive a group of improvising musicians forward without ever sounding overbearing. As a leader or a sideman, John always served the music rather than his own ego. He was an ideal collaborator.

As such, John was always a musician's musician, appreciated and celebrated by his peers, but the kind of crossover fame that elevated names like Keith Jarrett and John McLaughlin into mainstream media and public consciousness eluded him, not that he ever sought it. His playing spanned an astonishingly broad range of feeling, from duets on standards so restrained they shimmered at the very edge of silence, to brash guitar-synth lines with the power of a whole horn section, to fluidly articulated solos that unfolded with the inevitable logic of a dream, yet surprised at every turn. The first recording of John's I fell in love with remains a relative obscurity – his playing with late world-music pioneer Collin Walcott on an ECM album called "Cloud Dance" – but John's sensitive accompaniment to Walcott's sitar, of all things, proved to be my personal gateway into all of jazz; I still weep when I hear John's entrance after Collin's poignant solo intro. Shortly after that, I discovered John's first album as a leader, "Timeless," and the melody of the extended title track – played like a classical Indian raga, with a preliminary *alap* section – seemed so primordial and essential, it sounded like John *discovered* it rather than composed it.

Finding out later that John and Jan Hammer, the keyboardist on the track, recorded "Timeless" while playing gigs at a strip club in New York City only made it better, like a perfect lotus that blossomed in a muddy pond. And finding out after that that ECM impresario Manfred Eicher was so moved by the performance that he invited John, Jan, and drummer Jack DeJohnette to lay down in the dark in the studio and listen to it with him afterwards just seemed right. Like many of John's recordings, listening to "Timeless" is its own form of meditation.

Over the years, I saw John perform dozens of times, in dozens of contexts. When Jack DeJohnette's New Directions band with Lester Bowie and Eddie Gomez came to Oberlin College in the late '70s, I got to meet John, and found him to be what Yiddish speakers call a total *mensch* – a real human being, humble, hilarious, and totally unpretentious. I saw him play exquisite duets with Ralph Towner, with whom he recorded *Sargasso Sea* and *Five Years Later*, albums of such empathy and delicacy they're practically a genre unto themselves. One of the most amusing performances of John's I ever saw took place at a dive bar in Oakland. I happened to be in the neighborhood walking by, and saw a flyer reading JOHN ABERCROMBIE TONITE tacked up on the door. I couldn't believe that this world-renowned musician was gigging at a corner bar of questionable repute, but John was then living in North Beach with his wife Lisa after leaving New York City, and probably appreciated the opportunity to play. About a half a dozen people showed up to hear a show people would have lined up around the block for

half a dozen people showed up to hear two sets that people would have lined up around the block for at the Blue Note, and at one point, John simply asked the audience to call out tunes they wanted to hear. The pickup band included Patrick O'Hearn of Missing Persons on bass, and John showed him the chords for "Timeless" right then and there. After the performance, Patrick looked at John and said, "Oh man, that was like, *cosmic* or something!" Indeed. And when John found out I'd taken public transit from San Francisco to be at the gig, he drove me home, though it took him out of his way. What a guy.

When Lisa asked me to write something about John for his birthday, I started thinking about what makes his music so special to me. Listening to an unofficial recording of one of John's favorite standards, "Beautiful Love," it occurred to me that John's playing has a depth and maturity to it that few players in any genre ever reach, while at the same time being endlessly playful. He's never conning you with cheap sentiment or hyped-up enthusiasm; every note is shaded with authentic, probing emotion, like words in a conversation so grounded and real that it changes your life. John's name belongs in the exalted company of musicians like Bill Evans, Miles Davis, and Wayne Shorter, whose music opened up new landscapes in the listener's innermost being. Without John's music, I don't even know who I would be, which is the highest compliment I can give any musician.

Thanks John, and thanks to Lisa for this opportunity.