For over 30 years the cornerstone of John’s music has been found in the John Scofield Trio. The group includes old friends and longtime musical partners, bassist Steve Swallow and drummer Bill Stewart – three great musicians hitting their stride through invention, playing tight jazz standard and sassy original compositions. Their music embodies the spirit that has kept jazz vigorous and visceral since its birth.

“I love to make a real jazz-improvising statement in live situations with two of my favorite musicians,” Scofield says. “It’s really challenging. You don’t rely on arrangements as much as on the way the group plays together. It’s impossible to judge your own work completely.” Scofield says, “but I think this is always some of my best playing.”

One of the “big three” of current jazz guitarists (along with Pat Metheny and Bill Frisell), Scofield’s influence has been ever present for close two three decades. Possessor of a very distinctive rock-oriented sound that utilizes overdrive, Scofield is a masterful jazz improviser whose music generally falls somewhere between post-bop, fusion, and soul jazz.

Born in Ohio and raised in suburban Connecticut, Scofield took up the guitar at age 11, inspired by both rock and blues players. A local teacher introduced him to Wes Montgomery, Jim Hall and Pat Martino, which sparked a lifelong love of jazz. Scofield soon attended the Berklee College of Music, later moving into the public eye with a wide variety of bandleaders and musicians including Charles Mingus, Herbie Hancock, Chick Corea, Joe Henderson, Billy Cobham/George Duke, Gerry Mulligan, McCoy Tyner, Jim Hall, and Gary Burton. In 1982, he began a three-and-a-half-year stint touring with Miles Davis. Scofield’s compositions and inimitable guitar work appear on three of Davis’ albums.

Scofield began recording as a leader in the late 1970s, establishing himself as an influential and innovative player and composer. His recordings—many already classics—include collaborations with contemporary favorites like Pat Metheny, Medeski, Martin & Wood, Bill Frisell, Government Mule, and Joe Lovano. Through it all, the guitarist has kept an open musical mind.
Jazz Guitarist in a Gospel-Soul Catharsis

Groove has always been an essential element for the jazz guitarist John Scofield, expressing itself in ways either subtle or obvious, depending on the setting. “Piety Street” (Emarcy), released last week, falls in the obvious category, with a fortunate twist: it’s Mr. Scofield’s old-time gospel album, recorded in New Orleans with a band drawn mainly from that city’s robust R&B scene. It’s a basic concept, and it makes all kinds of sense.

The same could be said of Mr. Scofield’s staunchly exuberant show at B. B. King Blues Club & Grill on Sunday night. Joined by the core players from the album — the pianist Jon Cleary, the bassist George Porter Jr. and the drummer Ricky Fataar — he played the greater share of its songs, achieving the proper blend of grace and grit. He didn’t sound like a visitor in the realm. He sounded at home and happy to be there.

And crucially, he seemed aware of both the music’s needs and its potential limitations. Instead of navigating fast-moving streams of rhythm and harmony, as in his post-bop bands, he was leaning on a stable firmament. So he dug in deep, often parceling his notes into flinty riffs. When he did
let loose with a digressive chord or a ribbon of arpeggios, it was usually in the heat of full-group catharsis.

The band brought depth and shading to even the most straightforward rhythmic conceit. Much of this was the work of Mr. Porter, known as a member of the Meters, the epochal New Orleans funk band. A canny embellisher, he often created a counterpoint to Mr. Scofield’s leads.

He also sang, notably on “Never Turn Back,” a Thomas A. Dorsey tune that in this version became a sprawling but hard-driving jam.

Chief vocal duties fell to Mr. Cleary, who has an appealingly weathered voice and a smartly soulful attack. (On the album he sometimes yields the floor to John Boutté, a more incandescent singer, but that missing substitution barely registered here.)

In a few songs, including “Something’s Got a Hold on Me,” Mr. Cleary got vocal backing from one or more of his band mates, suggesting the vintage style of a group like the Dixie Hummingbirds. His keyboard playing, on a pair of synthesizers set to evoke a piano and a Hammond B-3 organ, was rollicking and pithy.

Mr. Scofield reinvented some of the songs in the repertory, outfitting “Motherless Child” with sharp new harmonies and bestowing a Celtic tinge on Hank Williams’s “Angel of Death.” But the more satisfying moments were the simplest. “It’s a Big Army,” the set closer, plowed straight into rafters-raising territory, and Mr. Scofield responded with a frolicsome surrender.
JOHN SCOFIELD "Piety Street" Emarcy/Decca

Friday, April 17, 2009

JOHN SCOFIELD "Piety Street" Emarcy/Decca

A HOLY BLUES ALBUM from jazz vet John Scofield? "Piety Street," a tambourine-rattling mix of spiritual anthems old and new, certainly qualifies, with Scofield's guitar often leading the choir.

Not that the performances are tradition-bound. Playing songs associated with Mahalia Jackson ("Just a Little While to Stay Here"), Dorothy Love Coates ("That's Enough"), the Rev. James Cleveland ("Something's Got a Hold on Me") and other gospel luminaries, along with a pair of original tunes, Scofield and a band well-versed in New Orleans grooves dish out plenty of Southern funk. Also apparent are reggae and country-music influences -- indeed, Hank Williams's "The Angel of Death" makes the cut -- but from the outset there's a whole lot of testifying going on.

"That's Enough" and "Motherless Child," the album's opening tracks, make it clear that Scofield remains an unabashed disciple of B.B. King. On other cuts, however, Scofield's phrasing is slippery or wah-wah-driven, in sync with Meters bassist George Porter Jr.'s signature pulse and the soulful contributions of keyboardist-vocalist Jon Cleary and singer John Boutte.

Occasionally "Piety Street" brings to mind "That's What I Say," the Ray Charles tribute that Scofield released four years ago. Only this time around the songs were designed to serve a higher purpose. No doubt Charles himself would approve.

-- Mike Joyce
John Scofield

One of the "big three" of current jazz guitarists (along with Pat Metheny and Bill Frisell), John Scofield's influence has been ever present for close two three decades. Possessor of a very distinctive rock-oriented sound that utilizes overdrive, Scofield is a masterful jazz improviser whose music generally falls somewhere between post-bop, fusion, and soul jazz.

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Previously recorded outings by Scofield have found him performing in elaborate settings. His works range from the plugged-in, electronically tweaked jamming of *Up All Night*, to the full orchestral setting of the recent *Scorched*, a collaboration with British composer Mark-Anthony Turnage. Most recently, Scofield joined forces with Medeski, Martin & Wood on *Out Louder.* Scofield has also recently teamed up with Larry Goldings and Jack DeJohnette to form *Trio Beyond*, a tribute to the late Tony Williams, receiving a Grammy award nomination for their release *Saudades.*

Between tours with Medeski, Scofield, Martín & Wood, Trio Beyond, the John Scofield Trio, Phil Lesh and Friends, and more, Scofield has made the time to record a new project with horns. The resulting album, *This Meets That*, to be released in September 2007, will be followed with supporting tours in October and November, and tour periods throughout 2008.
Born in Ohio and raised in suburban Connecticut, Scofield took up the guitar at age 11, inspired by both rock and blues players. A local teacher introduced him to Wes Montgomery, Jim Hall and Pat Martino, which sparked a lifelong love of jazz. Sco soon attended the Berklee College of Music, later moving into the public eye with a wide variety of bandleaders and musicians including Charles Mingus, Herbie Hancock, Chick Corea, Joe Henderson, Billy Cobham/George Duke, Gerry Mulligan, McCoy Tyner, Jim Hall, and Gary Burton. In 1982, he began a three-and-a-half-year stint touring with Miles Davis. Scofield’s compositions and inimitable guitar work appear on three of Davis’ albums.

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**Autobiography by John Scofield**

*How I Got From There to Here in 704 Easy Words*

When I first got into jazz -- around 1969, I came from playing R&B and Soul in High School. Jazz Rock was in its infancy stage and I was lucky enough to be around to experience the Golden Age of both Rock and Soul and see Jazz embrace that movement while I was trying to learn how to play straightahead Jazz. A lot of my early chances to actually gig were in various Jazz/Rock idioms. I got to play "real" jazz with Gary Burton and Gerry Mulligan but my real first "big time" gig was with the Billy Cobham/George Duke band. We got to play in gigantic concert halls and rock venues for excited people who were not necessarily jazz aficionados, but loved the music.

After that band ended, I stayed home in NYC and worked on playing acoustic jazz with my own groups and people like Dave Liebman. I also started an ongoing musical relationship with bassist Steve Swallow that continues to this day. As a jazz bassist and real songwriter (not just a composer) Swallow has influenced me as much as anyone.

In 1982, I joined the Miles Davis Band, answering the call of funky jazz once again. My stint with Miles made me sure that there really was a kind of music that was both funky and improvised at the same time.

After playing with Miles for over three years and making a few more records of my own, I hooked up with ex-P-Funk drummer Dennis Chambers, and we made a group that really utilized funk rhythms. Dennis and bassist Gary Grainger were masters of that "James Brown/Earth Wind and Fire/70's thing". It was great having that underneath my tunes.

When I signed with Blue Note Records in 1989, I decided to explore more "swinging" avenues. I got together with my old Berklee School buddy, genius saxophonist Joe Lovano. We had a group and made three albums for Blue Note -- four counting a bootleg from Europe -- that are probably my very best "jazz" endeavors. Part of that can also be attributed to the magnificent drumming of Bill Stewart, who is as good a musician as I've ever met.
Then I felt the urge to get into a soul-jazz thing. I’d been really influenced by the music of Eddie Harris and Les McCann from the sixties. I invited Eddie to guest on the album Hand Jive. This was about the same time that Larry Goldings entered my music on Hammond Organ. With the collective possibilities of these musicians, I began to allow jazz to blend with New Orleans type rhythms to make the music groove.

Around this period, I also worked and recorded some with Pat Metheny -- one of the great guitarists. He and Bill Frisell are my favorite guitar players to play with and listen to. But then there's also Jim Hall and Mike Stern and Jim Hall and John Abercrombie and Jim Hall and Kurt Rosenwinkle and Jim Hall and Peter Bernstein... not to mention Jim Hall. And then there's also Albert King and Carlos Santana and Tom Morello and all the other ones I can't summon the names of right at the moment.

When I heard Medeski, Martin and Wood’s record "Shack Man", I knew I had to play with them. They played those swampy grooves and had a free jazz attitude. These guys are serious conceptualists and are able to take the music to beautiful and strange places. I love what they did on AGoGo. In the last couple of years, I've heard some great young players that remind me often of what it is that I like so much about the music of sixties R&B.

Now I’m able to take that music and mix it with jazz all over again. I’m having more fun playing now than I ever have and I feel like I can finally really learn to play the guitar. Now, after having the chance to play with many of my musical idols -- I’m getting inspiration from younger musicians. I’m as excited about writing and playing music as I ever have been.
John Scofield: Funk Finds Its Swing

Listen Now [13 min 25 sec]

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Weekend Edition Sunday, November 18, 2007 - Nowadays, guitarist John Scofield is largely known for his funky side. He's worked on the fringes of jazz-rock and released discs incorporating the dense grooves of Medeski, Martin & Wood, as well as members of Sex Mob and Soul Coughing. A recent Scofield album paid tribute to soul man Ray Charles.

But Scofield developed his chops by playing with the likes of Miles Davis, Chet Baker, Gerry Mulligan and Charles Mingus. His new CD, *This Meets That*, finds Scofield largely back in his swing element. It features the other members of what he calls his "A-Team" trio — bassist Steve Swallow and drummer Bill Stewart — plus a hard-blowing four-piece horn section.

"We covered some kind of rock tunes," Scofield says, "and there are other tunes that are kind of funky. But I think the swing feel wins out for the majority of the music."

John Scofield spoke with Liane Hansen about his new album, and brought out his guitar for a special solo performance.

On *This Meets That*, Scofield used the opportunity to bring to life some songs which aren't particularly associated with jazz — for example, "House of the Rising Sun," popularized by The Animals.

"It's one of these anthems that everybody learns when they're learning to play the guitar, and I did in 1960- whatever when it came out," Scofield says. "It turns out kids today still learn that four-chord progression when they're just picking up the guitar."

Guitarist Bill Frisell makes a guest appearance on the song, despite his initial apprehension. "We were talking about that as we recorded it, 'cause I said I wanted to do this, and he says, 'Oh, you've got to be kidding,'" Scofield says. "And then we both realized, you know, that it was almost the first song either of us had ever learned."
Scofield also used the record to expand the size of his ensemble, something he says he's always wanted to do.

"When I write a tune — and it's been like this for many years — I always hear in the back of my head some sort of vague, orchestrated, fully fleshed-out big-band version of the song with other parts going on," Scofield says. "And I never really get to get to that really often because I'm usually playing with trios and quartets on the road, you know, for economic reasons, too."

Not that Scofield abandons the highly groove-oriented jams which have won him acclaim in recent years. He dedicates one tune called "Heck of a Job" to the New Orleans funk band The Meters, a group which led him to see the entire diaspora of New Orleans music.

"The Meters are, I think, the most influential group in our time to come out of New Orleans, to have changed and introduced us all to a way of playing, and to a groove and a level of feel in playing funk-jazz," Scofield says.

Scofield left NPR with a solo performance of "Behind Closed Doors," a tune written by country artist Charlie Rich. Though the music of Rich doesn't enter most jazz fans' minds, Scofield says that he draws inspiration from the vocal phrasing of older country music in his improvisation.

"Everybody thinks country is this, soul music is this, jazz is this, folk music is this, and they all take on these social groups and whatever," he says. "But I just always loved that song, and I always loved roots-country music — people like Charlie Rich."

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John Scofield's 'Uberjam'
It was inevitable. Guitarist John Scofield has, for the past decade, alternated regularly between albums aimed at the groove-centric (and broader) demographic he first captured with *A Go Go* (Verve, 1998) and discs appealing to a more committed jazz audience. Scofield has always represented a unique combination of advanced harmony, allowing him to seamlessly migrate between playing “in” and “out,” visceral funk and blues concerns. The “This” and “That” music, referred to in the title *This Meets That*, is even more broad-reaching than usual, but Scofield has finally assimilated his multiplicity of musical interests, making this one of the best records of his career.

It’s the same core trio from *EnRoute* (Verve, 2004)—bassist Steve Swallow and drummer Bill Stewart—but it couldn’t sound more different. With the addition of a four-piece horn section and material ranging from swing to funk and free territory to country (with a bit of altered rock and roll thrown in), Scofield has never sounded more divergent yet, curiously, more himself. Swallow and Stewart have always been known for their individual musical breadth and abilities to combine firm pulse and telepathic interaction with whomever they’re playing, but here, they make as perfect a team with Scofield as can be imagined.

Scofield’s tone ranges from the clean warmth that dominated most of *EnRoute* to the grittier tone of albums like *That’s What I Say* (Verve, 2005). And while it doesn’t overwhelm the disc, some of the processing that he began using with his Uberjam band on albums including *Up All Night* (Verve, 2003) can be heard as well, most notably on his solo intro to the Celtic/Americana-infused “Down D.” He applies a little wah-wah envelope filter to the funk-infused Time, tinged “Heck of a Job.”
the horns both broaden harmonically and punctuate.

Scofield has scored for horns before, but on the comfortably swinging “Strangeness in the Night” the four horns sound more like a big band, while taking “Down D” to harmonic territory that can only be described as “Sco.” A trio version of the country classic “Behind Closed Doors,” plays it straight at the outset, but Scofield ultimately makes it his own with a lyrical, behind-the-beat solo.

Scofield revisits “Pretty Out,” from his collaboration with Bill Frisell, *Grace Under Pressure* (Blue Note, 1992), but this time it’s even farther out, with a free-time middle section featuring open-ended solos by both Sco and Stewart. Frisell returns for a guest appearance on an up-tempo remake of the classic “House of the Rising Sun,” avoiding shtick with a new bridge section and significant reharmonization that’s reverent yet distinctive.

Scofield comes closer to that shtick with his rocking version of The Rolling Stones’ “I Can’t Get No Satisfaction,” but just when it seems that there’s little to be done, he injects some beautiful close-voicings on guitar that are matched in slight dissonance by the horns, making it a perfect closer to an album where, indeed, *This Meets That.*

**Track Listing:** The Low Road; Down D; Strangeness in the Night; Heck of a Job; Behind Closed Doors; House of the Rising Sun; Shoe Dog; Memorette; Trio Blues; Pretty Out; I Can’t Get No Satisfaction.

**Personnel:** John Scofield: guitar; Steve Swallow: bass; Bill Stewart: drums; Roger Rosenberg: baritone saxophone, bass clarinet; Lawrence Feldman: tenor saxophone, flutes; Jim Pugh: trombone; John Swana: trumpet, flugelhorn; Bill Frisell: tremolo guitar (6).

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Scofield, Mehldau trios
thrive Richmond jazz fans

BY DOUGLAS WATTS
SPECIAL CORRESPONDENT

The jazz trio format was in the spotlight last night as two of the top threesomes in the business entertained a sold-out crowd at the University of Richmond Modlin Center. The Brad Mehldau and John Scofield Trios both performed in a nearly three-hour show.

Seeing either of these bands play alone would have been a treat. Getting to see both was a rare pleasure for live jazz in Richmond.

Mehldau kicked things off on the piano with “All the Things You Are” accompanied by Larry Grenadier on acoustic stand-up bass and Jeff Ballard on drums. Their uptempo treatment of this standard featured solos by all three players.

The pace was slowed down on the next tune with a simmering Salsa rhythm. Grenadier solidly kept the tempo while leaving open spaces for Mehldau to draw out the melody, allowing the song to slowly evolve.

“The Very Thought of You” got a slow, bluesy treatment with Mehldau providing deep, rich piano tones with his left hand chord comping. Contorting his body and cocking his head slightly to one side, he poured himself entirely into the music.

They finished their set with a Nick Drake song entitled “Day Is Done.” Here, Grenadier introduced the melody before leading into a funky, rhythmic solo. Ballard deceptively looked cool and calm while keeping a ferocious, lively beat as Mehldau stretched out for some improvising. This resulted in the first standing ovation of the evening.

John Scofield showed why he is considered one of the best guitarists in modern jazz. With longtime collaborators Steve Swallow on bass and Bill Stewart on drums, the trio played a set mostly comprised of songs from their recent live CD “En Route.”

On “Green Tea,” Scofield swayed back and forth to the music with his eyes closed, playing funky, angular lead lines over a percolating rhythm. His bright red, semi-hollow body guitar was played using a variety of effects, particularly echo and delay, giving him a rock-oriented sound at times.

Swallow played an unusual 5-string acoustic-electric bass on which he sometimes strummed chords with his fingers while using a pick to hit the root notes of the chords. He combined rapid-fire solos with walking bass line rhythms.

Scofield sounded his best on Burt Bacharach’s “Alphie” and his own composition “Hammock Soliloquy.” Alphie was slow with plenty of improvisation. “Hammock Soliloquy,” which he said was named by his teenage son when he couldn’t think of a title, featured numerous tempo changes and some throw-down wah-wah pedal lead guitar.

The evening ended with Mehldau joining Scofield’s trio for an encore that they described as “jam band style.” The crowd erupted with a loud standing ovation.
JOHN Scohield TRIO
EnRoute
Verve

It can’t be easy to hold onto a Verve contract in the midst of the company’s drastic downsizing. But to do what John Scofield has done here—revive a jazz trio he last documented in the early 1980s—signifies an even rarer kind of clout. Commercially, Scofield owes his powerhouse status in part to his jam-band crossover projects, beginning with 1997’s

A Go Go, his sophomore Verve release in the company of Medeski, Martin & Wood. His two outings thus far with the John Scofield Band, Oberjam and Up All Night, have popularized him further without dumbing him down. The JSB albums are heavy on the funk, with sonic references to hip-hop and DJ culture. EnRoute, on the other hand, is a swingin’ affair, and perhaps a riskier business proposition. But when heavyweights like Scofield want to swing, companies like Verve listen.

EnRoute’s historical antecedents are Out Like a Light (1981) and Shinola (1982), both on Enja. An earlier trio album, Bar Talk, came out on Javel/Novus in 1980 and is quite hard to find. Scofield recorded these albums live in Europe with Steve Swallow on electric bass and Adam Nussbaum on drums. On EnRoute, Scofield and Swallow reunite, with Bill Stewart taking over for Nussbaum on drums. The setting, once again, is live: nine tracks in all, culled from a stint at the Blue Note in New York in December 2003.

Out Like a Light and Shinola consisted mainly of original tunes by Scofield, and those tunes stand up remarkably well today. The lazy swagger of “Why’d You Do It?” and “Rags to Riches,” the freeplay of “Out Like a Light,” the tempoless duo musings of Scofield and Swallow on “Jean the Bean,” the dark, ethereal magic of “Yawn,” the powerful grooves of “Miss Directions” and “Holidays,” the garage-rock bombast and latent subtlety of “Shinola”: this remains some of the strongest, most idiosyncratic writing of Scofield’s career.

The Shinola trio did not record again, but its members continued to work together often. Scofield and Nussbaum played in Dave Liebman’s group in the late ’70s. The guitarist rejoined Swallow...
in Paul Bley's group of the mid-'80s, Swallow has used Nussbaum on his last three XtraWatt releases, the most recent being Damaged in Transit, a spellbinding trio date not only with Scofield but with Chris Potter. (Liebman has done trio gigs with Swallow and Nussbaum as well.) In the mid-'90s, Bill Stewart and Swallow appeared together on two exceptional Scofield albums, I Can See Your House From Here and Quiet, joined by Pat Metheny and a large ensemble respectively. A Scofield trio with Swallow and Stewart was just waiting to happen.

The six Scofield originals on EnRoute don't rise to the level of the '80s trio records, but they're consistently engaging, and they bring out the best in every band member. The album packs a punch that only three well-acquainted players can deliver. In comparison, 2001's Works for Mr. Scofield's last straightahead jazz album, is far less exploratory, despite the input of all-stars Kenny Garrett, Brad Mehldau, Christian McBride and Billy Higgins.

Scofield's playing, although highly developed back in the '80s, is now more advanced rhythmically; his tone is a bit cleaner and more trebly. Swallow's attack is less rubbery, less aggressive (or perhaps just too low in the mix). While Nussbaum tends to be a sharper and a pounder, Stewart is more of a polyrhythmic gymnast.

The three lead off with Denzil Best's "Woo," a tuneful "rhythm changes" head that finds Scofield in fine boppish form. "Toogs," a loping 5/4 piece with a strong melody, brings to mind Our Like a Light's "Last Week," a 7/4 variant of Kern's "Yesterday." Returning to hop, the trio devours Swallow's "Name That Tune," a "Perdido" spinoff that first appeared on the bassist's quinter album Deconstructed, with Mick Goodrick on guitar. Scofield gives it a toothier, more extraverted treatment.

Three Scofield originals follow. "Hammock Soliloquy," a solid showcase for Stewart, begins and ends with a behind-the-beat feel in four but squeeze to fast waltz-time for the solos. "Bag," is a midtempo, organ-trio-type blues with a melody that should be a standard. "It Is Written" is an intriguing if not very memorable 4/4 swing tune, with ascending changes in the repeating 16-bar A section and a pedal-point tonality in the eight-bar B section. "Alfie," played beautifully by the trio, is the disc's only standard and also its only ballad. Wrapping up, Sco and company rip through the modified minor blues "Travel John" and stretch out on the syncopated funk vehicle "Over Big Top," a modification of 1995's "Big Top."

As always, Scofield inflects even flat-out bebop with a deeply guitaristic blues sensibility. Often he'll rely on edgy two-note ideas that sound like full chords thanks to the slight crunch in his sound. And even though EnRoute is in essence a "straightahead" album, Scofield doesn't hesitate to stomp on his Whammy pedal to warp and color a final chord, or to push a heated vamp over the edge.

Scofield has always been true to his evolving identity as an improviser, no matter what style he is playing. The John Scofield Band is a logical continuation of his hard-funk Gramavision period, or for that matter his tenure with a very electric Miles Davis. But even in his '80s fusion heyday, Scofield would turn up at the now-defunct Fat Tuesday's in New York, playing "It Could Happen to You" with Eddie Gomez and Al Foster, sounding very much like himself. We don't hear him play straightahead often enough, apart from his brilliant contributions on things like ScoLoHoPo's Oh!, Roy Haynes' Love Letters, Chris Potter's Unspoken and Joe Henderson's So Near, So Far. This new trio document couldn't have come at a better time. DAVID ADLER
ONE JULY
Going Through
Whether exploring fusion with Miles Davis, ripping bebop in a quartet, or getting his groove on with his Uberjam band, the shape-shifting John Scofield has never faked the funk. And while he's back to his straight-ahead roots with the live trio record *EnRoute*, his beloved Boomerang Phrase Sampler is never far from his foot.

BY KEN MICALLEF
PHOTOGRAPHY BY JOSEF ASTOR

In the summer of 1973, John Scofield landed his first major gig, playing with fusion racketeers Billy Cobham and George Duke on a tour that roped around the world and back again. Green yet gregarious, the guitarist leaned hard on his calculated jazz and blues licks and rode the Cobham/Duke caravan for all
it was worth. This gig would figure prominently in Scofield's development in the years to come, but at the time he was still fresh out of Berklee, a skinny unknown with more ambition than chops.

Thirty years later, John Scofield is one of the world's most famous jazz guitarists, a bearded, egg-headed, slightly bemused-looking figure whose savvy slurring, sliding, blues-inflected jazz, and computerized grooves are embraced by jamband devotees, jazzbos, and freaky hip-hop fans alike. With hot sauce-sharp guitar lines buoyed by samplers and hard drives, Scofield is the undisputed king of cybernetic jazz. But walking around the guitarist's comfortable home in an affluent New York bedroom community, it's clear that the real John Scofield is a guy who just loves to play music—be it jazz, funk, or jam. Just don't ask to see his mystery guitar room.

"I have this room that nobody is allowed to go in," Scofield says with a laugh. "I'm not really sure why. It's just in my basement, and it's not too attractive. I have 30 guitars down there: a lot of Ibanezes, a 1962 Gibson ES-335, a 1971 ES-175, a 1935 Martin dreadnought, a couple of nylon-string Takamines, a Montalvo flamenco guitar with nylon strings that I used on Quiet. And a bunch of amps: a '65 Fender Deluxe; a Matchless with two 12s, for recording; a couple of Mesa/Boogie; a Victoria Twin with two 12s. But like I said, nobody goes down there."

Scofield, however, is anything but private. Whereas some master musicians are secretive control freaks, the talkative guitarist is just an ordinary guy, albeit one who plays blistering jazz and psycho space-funk with an intensity matching that of today's metal mashers and retro-punk fashionistas. Having played with the greats of jazz,
including Miles Davis (whose 1983 album, *Decoy*, he co-wrote), Scofield has outlived not only trends but also low-sales turmoil. And while his endless style-straying brings him both crossover success and trad-jazz derision, he understands that, in the end, the only thing that matters is the music. His latest album, *EnRoute* (Verve), recorded live with the John Scofield Trio, goes a long way in shutting the mouths of jazz critics who scoff at the sample-filled funk of his Überjam band. Scofield has a word for them.

“What do they care what anybody does? It’s the political correctness of fascism to tell somebody what they’re supposed to play. It’s music, right? Do whatever you want—Lithuanian field hollers, whatever—it’s a free world. I love jazz, and I was happy to do this trio record and play from that tradition. But playing with the Überjam band and with the electronics has been so much fun. It’s ground that hasn’t been covered.”

*EnRoute*, with drummer Bill Stewart and electric bassist Steve Swallow, is a hard-core jazz blowout that revels in blitzkrieg tempos, daredevil improvisations, and Scofield’s pricky, angular melodies—which have graced his music ever since his 1977 solo debut, *East Meets West*. It is perhaps the most awe-inspiring pure jazz record of the year, the kind of insane blowing session that lies at the heart of jazz’s ethos.

“I wrote *EnRoute* specifically for this trio,” Scofield explains, “and we did some standards, too. ‘Bag’ is a 12-bar blues. ‘Name That Tune,’ by Steve Swallow, is built on the changes to ‘Perdido,’ ‘Wee’ is rhythm changes. ‘Travel John’ is a C-minor blues with changes loosely based on Chick Corea’s ‘Matrix’ [from *Now He Sings, Now He Sobs*]. ‘It Is Written’ is a straight-ahead jazz tune, form-wise, but it has some chords that are more associated with post-bop. All these songs are forms to play on; they are not vamps—except for ‘Over Big Top,’ which is just a bass line.”

With *EnRoute*, Scofield has seemingly returned to his roots; however, it’s his recent Überjam outings—2002’s *Überjam, 2003’s Up All Night*, and, most notably, 1997’s *A Go Go* (a collaboration with Medeski, Martin & Wood)—that have brought him serious chart success as well as cross-generational fame.

A recent performance at B.B. King’s in New York City, the house was packed with baggy-jeaned teens dancing to the Überjam band’s interstellar funk—bubbling grooves filled with woozy samples, mad loops, drum ‘n’ bass beats, and schizoid solos. Imagine the straight-ahead stew of *EnRoute* dumped into a blender with both the nervous digital scrabble of Aphex Twin and the black-hole fusion of Miles Davis’ *Agartha*, and you have some idea of the Überjam band’s sonic might.

But while rhythm guitarist Avi Bortnick uses a laptop computer to jostle the music in real time, Scofield’s guitar playing, as always, presides over the hypnotic proceedings.

“I don’t use computers, really,” Scofield exclaims. “I use the Boomerang Phrase Sampler, which makes the guitar play backwards or twice as fast. Is there a computer in there? I don’t know—there are chips and stuff. But I’m not a tech head. The sound of sampled beats, and the computer-like perfection—and even imperfection—have affected the way everybody in hip-hop plays. We copy that sound sometimes, but it’s subtle. And sometimes there’s a certain repetitive thing I’ll improvise, and that four-bar lick might sound like a sample.

“But what I use more than anything is the ‘backwards’ function,” he continues. “I’ll play a line, and it’ll repeat it, only
backwards, right away, in the same rhythm. I’ll make a long line where I only play the first half of it, and the second half is just the same thing, only backwards, or inverted. I can also turn it off and on anywhere during the backwards part. So, ideally, I’m making this long line, and one half or one quarter of it is backwards. Other times, I turn off the forward part and only have the backward part come out. That’s really weird. I can also play something and make a loop, speed it up, and then spin it backwards. There are so many possibilities with the Phrase Sampler, and it’s done on the fly, so I have all these different things shooting out. It’s fun as hell.”

Does his soloing change from jazz to space-funk formats?

“When I play with the jazz trio,” Scofield explains, “it’s more about swinging, and playing on changes. With Uberjam, it’s about funk and
vamping and texturing. They're the same heads but with different rhythms. The Uberjam band is also louder, more distorted, and has more effects and sonic devices. With the trio, we're playing tunes, like, AABA, and following the changes and harmonic structure. I start to miss that when I haven't done it for a while. Of course, there's an equipment change, but both idioms feel really comfortable to me now.

I could never do it, and so I felt like a failure. But you don't want to be totally successful at that. I found that for the guys who were good enough to play exactly like somebody else, by the time they learned to do it, it was too late. They put so much effort into being George Benson or John Coltrane that they lost the valuable time they should have been spending working on their own voice.

From his earliest days with Miles Davis, Scofield learned what all committed jazz players learn: how to play in the moment. Forget your hot licks, rote chord inversions, and copycat solos—this is the instant when you put aside everything you've learned and just let it rip. Thoughts, concerns—even the band—be damned. But that kind of freedom only comes through experience.

"That's different from playing what you've rehearsed," Scofield says. "There's a real similarity between playing and speech. When I talk to you, I'm talking in sentences and paragraphs, and, hopefully, conveying ideas. If I have an idea, I have a vocabulary that I can use to express it. It's the same thing with music. One thought leads to another; that's what

whether he's ripping on his beloved '81 Ibanez AS-200 on jazz, space funk, or even the semi-classical sounds of his early 2004 release, Scorched (Deutsche Grammophon), with British composer Mark-Anthony Turnage. Scofield's mission remains the same: to get down and get to it. Even cursory listen to 1983's What We Do (Blue Note), 1988's Loud Jazz (GRP), and 2000's Bump (Verve) reveal all the slurs and slides, fiery squalls, and flailing fretboard squiggles for which the mercurial jazz king is renown.

"I started out with blues guitar," says Scofield, "and slurring is just natural to the B.B. King style. I never had a really fast right hand. If I had been able to pick really fast and articulate every note, I probably would have done more of that. But I couldn't, so I did more pull-offs. Jim Hall did that before me, slurring like that. When I started to play bop and jazz lines, which are different from B.B. King, I just worked out hammer-ons and pull-offs."

What changes for Scofield is the format, not the function. Since the release of Decoy, his melodic trademarks have remained constant. He arrived at this signature sound through lots of practice, risk-taking, and an inherent need to find out if he really had the goods.

"You're always stuck with how to create your own thing," Scofield admits. "At a certain point you have to think, 'How can I let the music come out of me?' You have to accept your limitations and develop your strong points. Since I couldn't pick every note, like John McLaughlin or Pat Martino, I developed more of an legato thing. That was a weakness that turned into something good. When you hear people like [composer/pianist] Thelonious Monk, they are so themselves. You can love other musicians and draw from them, but you are you.

"As far as copying goes," he adds, "I would copy other player's lines, but it always came out different. I realized that when you copy other people, it comes out differently—and that's you. I was obsessed with Pat Martino's Strings, and I spent days copying him, but
‘in the moment’ means to me. And we develop and work on that so it becomes second nature. When you first start playing, you try to jam in all your licks. But in between all that, some other stuff happens, and that’s usually ‘in the moment’ playing. Then you realize that you want to listen to what’s going on around you and respond, and not just jam in your stuff.

Further along in the evolution of a guitarist’s playing, along the arcing timeline of his talent trajectory, he hits a bigger moment—the one where he’s played for so long that the instrument seems to play itself. His mind wanders to that luscious blonde in the front row, and before he knows it, the solo is over. This is to be avoided at all costs, says Scofield.

“When you play for a while, you go to this state where you’re letting the music come out. But you have to decide where to go. I used to think that you’re not supposed to think, but the two states exist simultaneously. I don’t try to not think anymore. The thing about being in the moment is that you’re responding to ideas that are passing through you—you’re observing and thinking—and you don’t want to shut that off. The music becomes a real psychocentric with the other players. That’s what I love about jazz—the common knowledge of the music we’re playing. And when you’re really tapped in, you’re going the same places together.”

The nagging question remains: After all the teeth-cutting, how do the greats become great, while the wanna-bes disperse?

“You work on these things as you’re learning, and then it passes—this obsession with one thing or phrase,” Scofield explains. “It’ll come back around and enter your vocabulary in a different way. It comes down to faith in yourself, because that’s all you have—faith that your own voice is special. You could sound like Mr. Rogers, but Mr. Rogers is deep for a reason. We all have our own voice, and we have to believe in it, because that’s all we have. You have to be yourself and go with it and develop yourself. But it also comes down to whether you can or can’t play. I’ve played a lot of bad nights, where it was technical and coming out kind of constipated.”

Constipated? Apparently even emperors of guitar have nights when the royal roughage gets clogged and no triumphal message can be delivered to the masses. But even during these moments of drought, Scofield insists he never calls into question his demographic market.

“If we’re worried too much about communicating jazz, then we’re dumbing it down. We have to communicate, and play music that really is from our heart—stuff that gives us the chills. And, hopefully, music that will touch other people. The whole ‘let’s make jazz relevant today’ thing is something that I’d rather avoid. The point is to make great music—that’s what communicates with people.”

No matter what night or venue, or to what audience, be it jazz or jamband?

“You know,” Scofield concludes, “whenever I’m playing, that’s my big night—wherever I am.”
JOHN SCOFIELD STRIPS DOWN

“Whenever I listen to tapes of my gigs, I usually say, ‘Oh God, why can’t I ever play like that when I’m making a studio album?’”

For revered jazz funkateer John Scofield, the short-term answer to his own question was choosing not to track his latest release in a studio. Recorded during four nights at the legendary Blue Note jazz club in New York City, EnRoute [Verve] is Scofield’s first live album in years, and the project freed the guitarist to get warmed up and play things straight through.

“In the studio, you never get warmed up, because you’re thinking about the production values, the sound, and the arrangement,” he says. “But on a gig, I can play with the band for 80 minutes or so, and then something usually starts to happen. There’s some kind of magic that flows when a band gets all geared up—especially in the jazz idiom. And when the audience is into what you’re doing, it makes you feel good and play better. No man is an island, you know? I really love the feeling when a room is happening.”

The album’s magical vibe is enhanced by the fact that Scofield downsized to a trio with long-time comrades Steve Swallow (bass) and Bill Stewart (drums). As a result, his rich textures, cascading arpeggios, and rhythmic interplay are right in your face.

“In a trio, you really are naked,” says Scofield. “You must use everything you have—single notes, chords, and double-stops—to create different textures.”

Scofield also cut loose a chunk of his rig for the recordings, playing his signature Ibanez AS200 simultaneously through a Matchless DC30 2x12 combo and a direct box. There’s a bit of a DigiTech Whammy pedal on “Toogs,” and some subtle effects on a couple of other songs, but the album is mostly fingers to guitar to amp.

“I didn’t want to use a lot of effects for this recording, because I’ve been doing that a lot lately,” he says. “And, anyway, the music we were playing was kind of traditional, so obvious signal processing wasn’t really appropriate.”

Sco fans will be thrilled that EnRoute showcases some of the guitarist’s most harmonically complex writing, and that the trio also flies through some bop tunes.

“I’ve been working on playing at fast tempos,” enthuses Scofield. “I don’t think I’m naturally a speedy player, like John McLaughlin or George Benson, who seem to play fast effortlessly. So you can listen for my mistakes, and feel better!” —Ari Messer
September 24, 2004

JAZZ REVIEW  JOHN SCOFIELD

Scofield Stays Out in Front With His Trio

By BEN RATLIFF

For 25 years the guitarist John Scofield has cooked enough comfortable permutations of jazz-funk, jazz-rock and the long, spacious grooves of jam-band music to reheat for the rest of his career. So his decision to scale back to a working trio with the bassist Steve Swallow and the drummer Bill Stewart seemed honest and challenging as well as a return to some older ground. (He made several trio albums with Mr. Swallow in the early 1980's.)

But it also offers a better chance to see what Mr. Scofield has now, as a soloist and a composer. Though his trio is a busy group, Mr. Scofield stays right out front all the time; the burden is on him to remain a compelling improviser.

This week the band is playing at the Blue Note, where it recorded a live album only 10 months ago, the just-released "En Route" (Verve). And Tuesday's early set sounded better than the album, with more of everything, bite and speed and delicacy. It was an incredibly resourceful display of devices and strategies.

Mr. Scofield used many of his electric guitar's possibilities, playing with different kinds of language and feel. For soloing with a New Orleans funk beat, he produced sound with his fretting hand more than his picking hand; he mashed the strings, making notes smear and wobble, giving you the feeling of sinking slightly in the ground as you try to walk. For jazz ballads (as in his version of "Alfie"), he plays lightly with a muted tone. For his own harder-edged songs ("Hammock Soliloquy" or "Over Big Top"), he got a bright, slashing sound and adopted Thelonious Monk's sticky-fingered, mock-stiff rhythmic feeling, backing the melody with awkward lower harmonies; he organized melodic lines into upside-down-sounding chords.

In fast tunes he just burned, playing as fast as he could while still retaining a bit of taste. And when that became too dull, he played tension-and-release, unsentimentally cropping notes before they became ripe, then settling into others at length a few bars later, warming them up. Steering the band this much, he becomes a shrewd and slightly hyperactive mannerist. He exaggerates notes and phrases, making them excessively comic, ugly, beautiful, rocking or refined.

Mr. Swallow, on electric bass, is a driving player too; his guitar-like solos in rippling bebop rhythm could become too much in this context. (This really is a band for people who love the guitar.) Mr. Stewart was more reasonable, locking into the various kinds of grooves as they were needed and trying not to add more than strictly necessary. But the focus of the evening was on the long guitar solos, and Mr. Scofield controlled them tightly. He was too impatient to let them flag.
John Scofield's Piety Street is an exercise in musicology, but it's also much more than that. Without sacrificing the prominence of his electric guitar playing—just utilizing it from a different perspective—this gospel blues album further demonstrates how he has executed similar fusions, in altogether different contexts, throughout his extensive 36-album career.

Just as Scofield doesn't play in an obvious way, simultaneously staccato and fluid, so, too, does he pursue his renewed interest in blues from an unusual angle. "That's Enough" sounds like a simple declaration of faith, but what's noteworthy about the track is the supple means by which Scofield plays around the vocals—that's in addition to the shimmering sequence the guitarist/bandleader sprinkles upon the thick cushion of organ on "The Angel of Death."

Scofield's fond appreciation of the well-wrought compositions on Piety Street does not come at the expense of improvisation. The guitarist's forte goes on display in the low-key reggae ride-out of "Motherless Child," which leads logically into "It's a Big Army," the arrangement of which is as straightforward as a shuffle can be. The insistent pace there further quickens through the interplay of Scofield with keyboardist/vocalist Jon Cleary and, later in the track, a snappy percussion interlude that serves to highlight the massive yet somehow unobtrusive bottom supplied by George Porter Jr. The famous bassist's coupling in rhythm section with drummer Ricky Fataar (like Cleary a member of Bonnie Raitt's band) is on prominent display in the mix—clean and uncluttered, to accentuate the simplicity of the material.

Scofield fans, and those curious about the concept of Piety Street, will find some songs familiar—"Ninety Nine and Half," "I'll Fly Away"—and some not so much, like the limber instrumental, "But I Like the Message." And while there will certainly be those who long for more Scofield guitar and more extensive jamming, as on the serene "The Old Ship of Zion" (the sole 12-bar tune here), there's abundant nuance in the consistent intros Scofield supplies to presage the vocals throughout the album.
Given this man's fondness for the rhythmic aspect of playing, going back through his "Uberjam" phase, and his work with Medeski, Martin and Wood—as well as with mid-'80s Miles Davis and the '70s Billy Cobham/George Duke aggregation—it's no surprise "Never Turn Back" has more than just a suggestion of syncopated funk. There's a tangible sense of joyful release in the musicianship here—extracted, no doubt, from the sound of songs like "Just a Little While to Stay There," which provides continuity from Piety Street to John Scofield's work under his own name and with others: each and every one is suffused with passion.
John Scofield - Piety Street
EmArcy

By Jeff Tamarkin

Prediction: At some point in the not-too-distant future, a JazzTimes scribe will bring this CD to a session for a Before & After column and spin a track from it. Whichever unsuspecting musician is charged with identifying the chosen tune, even if he or she has long been familiar with John Scofield’s guitar, won’t come close. Simply put, Scofield has never made a record quite like Piety Street, a gloriously reverent paean to classic black gospel as practiced by such masters as Mahalia Jackson, Thomas A. Dorsey, Dorothy Love Coates and that old favorite, Traditional—with a Hank Williams tune (“Angel of Death”) and one Scofield original tossed in for good measure.

For the project, Scofield virtually overhauls his style, jettisoning contemporary technical aids and displays of virtuosity for a straightforward blues-based approach brimming with economy, joyfulness and soul. Aligning with New Orleans bassist George Porter Jr., drummer Ricky Fataar, percussionist Shannon Powell and, most significantly, vocalists Jon Cleary (who also supplies keys) and John Bouttè, Scofield exuberantly surveys the repertoire of the black church and its close relatives in blues and soul.

Although Scofield has before demonstrated his affection for those roots sounds—just four years ago he released a tribute album to Ray Charles—those who’ve championed Scofield’s more cerebral innovations over the years may come to Piety Street with a certain amount of wariness, perhaps thinking it a novelty. It’s not, and its honest righteousness and sweet spirit should easily win over all but the most hardheaded. And, of course, the guitar playing—even if it’s often a ringer for B.B. King or Pops Staples—is never less than godly.
JOHN SCOFIELD
Piett Street

John Scofield, guitar; Jon Cleary, keyboards, vocals; George Porter Jr., bass; Ricky Fataar, drums; Shannon Powell, percussion, drums; John Boutte, vocals
Performance: ★★★★★
Sonic: ★★★★★

Jazz musicians with long careers and longer lives tend to produce a prodigious number of recordings. Without a strong conceptual imagination, even an outstanding musician can be guilty of repetition, but the greatest ones challenge themselves in continually fresh contexts. Few have been more successful at this than guitarist John Scofield, who learned how to do it through his association with the master of shifting contexts, Miles Davis. Scofield has played in everything from chamber jazz ensembles to power trios, fusion combos, jam bands, and avant-garde outfits, along the way handling blues, R&B, pop ballads, jazz standards, and free jazz.

For this latest project, Scofield came up with a sly and novel idea: a New Orleans record that uses the traditional gospel canon as a jumping-off point for some soulful blues arrangements. Piett Street is a blues album masquerading as a gospel record, and Scofield’s handpicked band pulls it off faultlessly. From the opening verse of the Dorothy Love Coates classic “That’s Enough,” the guitarist’s beautifully recorded tone is striking—as pure and refreshing as a tall glass of water on a hot, humid afternoon. But the most arresting thing about this track is Jon Cleary’s outstanding keyboard work and vocal, which Scofield’s guitar dances with wonderfully before his second solo. Cleary doesn’t sound this good even with his own band.

Scofield and coproducer Mark Bingham chose George Porter Jr. to play bass, and Scofield brought in veteran session drummer Ricky Fataar, who fits perfectly with Porter—check out the reggae coda on “Motherless Child.” Shannon Powell adds percussion and plays drums on one track, while John Boutte joins Cleary on vocals, to particularly good effect on the slow, funky R&B take on “Ninety-Nine and a Half.”

It’s refreshing to hear gospel played this way: with respect for the music and the message, but without the devotee’s blind zeal. It effectively reunites gospel with the roots it holds in common with the blues. Scofield turns “His Eye Is On the Sparrow” and “The Old Ship of Zion” into powerful slow-blues vehicles, squeezes the funk out of “Never Turn Back,” refashions “Just a Little While to Stay Here” as an R&B ballad, makes “Walk With Me” sound like a Champion Jack Dupree tune, and delivers “Something’s Got a Hold on Me” as a shuffle with a great textured guitar solo. Scofield even channels a little Grant Green in his phrasing of the melody of the instrumental “But I Like the Message.” After all, Green, too, made a gospel album.

—John Swenson