

# > TIME MACHINE

## NARADA MICHAEL WALDEN: MUSIC'S RENAISSANCE MAN

BY RICH MANGICARO



He's been inspiring us since the early 70's, has helped jump start the careers of some of music's biggest names and still to this day, continues to re-invent himself as an artist and creative force. He's played on some of the most influential recordings in modern music and is a multiple Grammy Award recipient. Beginning his career in the Jazz Fusion world, Narada performed and recorded with the giants of the genre including the Mahavishnu Orchestra, Weather Report and Allan Holdsworth. From there, he embraced the Pop/R&B market, developing the careers of such legends as Whitney Houston and Mariah Carey and was also responsible for soul queen, Aretha Franklin's Song of the Year Grammy. Most recently, he's returned to one of his early gigs, touring with guitar virtuoso Jeff Beck.

Michael Walden was given the name Narada by his spiritual guru (teacher) Sri Chinmoy. It was a path he chose after being inspired by his relationship with John McLaughlin. The definition of Narada is an ultimate nomad or one who searches for the life of people, a fitting name for an artist and producer that has crossed over so many genres and affected so many important musical careers. He is a true journeyman and for all intents and purposes, a musical nomad.

DW: Narada, I hear you're back on the road with Jeff Beck?! Full-circle for you, right?

Narada: Yes, my career is flowing, like in the 70's! I'm touring with Jeff again and it's been real busy...14 shows in the last 17 days, 25,000 seat venues and also the New Orleans Jazz festival, which I've never done before. I get so much energy hearing the drums outdoors and I'm hitting hard to reach the people in the back...it's taking every bit of my fiber! Then I come home and gotta deal

with my studio and everything back there, so it's non-stop.

"I first met him (John McLaughlin) at a venue in Harford, CT. I watched him blazing, his body rockin' back and forth, with Billy Cobham just goin' at it. They were playing things I'd never seen before, actually, no one had ever seen before!"

DW: Where were you when you first started playing?

NMW: Kalamazoo, Michigan. My Dad bought me an album when I was 3 or 4, with Buddy Rich and Max Roach. At Christmas, he gave me a toy drum set, which was such a highlight. A bit later, I studied with a guy named Tom Carey, who was the first to help me with my left hand. I was about 9 and saw for the first time, a guy rockin' his left foot back and forth on the hi-hat, while playing around the kit and it was my first exposure

photos by Rob Shanahan  
to independence. I realized how important that was and then met another guy named Harold Mason, who was a great Jazz player; he later went on to play with Stevie Wonder. He taught me rudiments out of the Jim Chapin book. Then in high school, I played marching snare, timpani and was even the drum major; I realized I liked leading!

DW: You were not long out of high school when you went to Florida, right?

NMW: Yes, I was 19 and that's where I met Jaco (Pastorius), Cliff Carter, Hiram Bullock, Steve Morse, all those cats. We had a band down there, which prepared me for playing with Mahavishnu. Our band then moved to a farm up in CT that had a barn, which we converted into a full-on recording studio, drums all miked up, ready to go. It would be January, freezing, but we'd be out there playing.

DW: Talk about that first meeting with John McLaughlin.

NMW: I first met him at a venue in Harford, CT. I watched him blazing, his body rockin' back and forth, with Billy Cobham just goin' at it. They were playing things I'd never seen before, actually, no one had ever seen before! They played in various time signatures, from 13, to 17, to 19 and then stop on a dime, and begin again. It would go on for so long. Completely incredible, the accuracy, the rhythms were staggering. And it was completely spontaneous, which was even more mind-blowing! You looked around and the audience's mouths were dropped, you could hear a pin drop in there. At that show, I saw a guy dressed in white



**Search You Tube for Narada with Mahavishnu at the Montreux Jazz festival in 1974 to watch a blazing, inspiring live version of “Wings Of Karma”. Another must see – Narada with Weather Report performing “Black Market”...listen to the way Narada accompanies brilliantly during Wayne Shorter’s solo...this is true drumming artistry! For a more recent killing clip, check out Narada with Jeff Beck, a February 18th, 2010 show at Madison Square Garden in New York, just tearing up Jeff’s “Led Boots”!**

and I knew he was a disciple of Sri Chinmoy. I introduced myself and asked if I could meet Mahavishnu (John’s spiritual name). He took me back stage and I was euphoric, after hearing all that music they’d just played. John poked his head out and asked me to wait a bit. When he came back, I said, “I’m Michael Walden and whatever it is you’re doing to enable you to play that way, I want to do it too.” He told me it was largely due to his prayer and meditation practice and that he was going to see his Guru in the morning. I knew about his practice as I had gone to a center in Florida and also read his album notes. John said he would tell the Guru he met me. It then hit me that he was talking about that morning. We were in Hartford, it was already 1:00 am and he was going to

drive to Queens, all night, after what I just saw, to be there by 6:00 am! I then realized just how serious this guy was. I gave him my phone number and within a week’s time, he called me and said that he wanted to bring me to meet the Guru, who was going to be in Norwalk. When I got there, it was in a basement of a house and there he was, singing and playing the harmonium and immediately I sensed that same power I saw with (the band) Mahavishnu.

*DW: How long after that experience, did you begin playing with John?*

*NMW: Not long...we jammed across from the meditation hall once, just him and me. I also went to see him perform again*

in Massachusetts and that’s when I met Billy Cobham. Billy is a phenomenal cat. I was familiar with his playing and had been listening to him. After that show, he wanted to come to my house so we could play together and asked me to drive him in his car as he slept, about 2-3 hours away, unbelievable! I walked in and told the guys who were with me in the car and they couldn’t believe it. Then he walked in.

*DW: Who were some of your early drumming influences?*

*NMW: Early on, it was Art Blakey. I heard him play a backbeat in a Jazz tune and that was it! Later, it was Mitch Mitchell, Buddy*



Miles and of course, Elvin Jones. Elvin was just so raw and if you listen to Mitch Mitchell, you know he was just tryin' to get down with what Elvin was playing. I also love Jack DeJohnette, John Bonham and now in retrospect, Keith Moon. So much passion and power, he just gets to me. I also have to say, charisma-wise, Ringo Starr. He was a star. That's when I learned that you could work it, that you can reach the audience from behind the drum set. Then from the R&B side, Zigaboo from The Meters and Greg Errico from Sly and the Family Stone, just one of the best bands in the world!

DW: What came after Mahavishnu?

NMW: I worked on Weather Report's *Black Market* album and brought Jaco Pastorius to that band for a track called "Cannonball". Joe asked me to join the band, but I didn't want to be in a fusion band, I wanted to go Rock and Roll, so I joined Tommy Bolin's band. I still did some fusion records with Allan Holdsworth and Roy Buchanan. I was also getting my own first album together. It took another year, but I finally signed to Atlantic and did *Garden of Love Light*, which featured Carlos Santana, Jeff Beck and Eddie Gomez. I'm so proud of that record to this day.

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DW: What was your first production project? Let's get into that world.

NMW: The first project was Don Cherry. Commercially though, it was an album I did for Stacy Lattisaw. We rehearsed a lot, so we could be really tight and we were able to cut the tracks very quickly. We came in under budget and had some hits, so that's how I

moved in the production ranks.

DW: Did you know at that point that you wanted to move in that direction?

NMW: Not really 'cause I wanted to be a drummer and a solo artist, but Quincy (Jones) called me and encouraged me. He told me, "You write songs and people need producers, so you might want to think about that." Quincy was really my mentor and he was right.


DW: When you write, what's your starting point? Do you begin with a melody or a certain rhythm or do you start on piano?

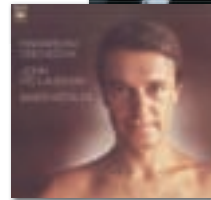
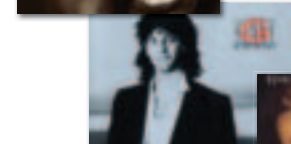
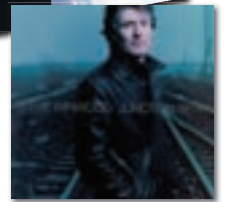
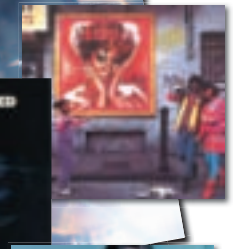
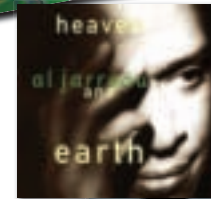
NMW: I go to piano usually. I like a piano chord-inspired melody. Sometimes I'll get a drum groove right away while I'm by the piano. Lately, I get a beat going on the Triton (synthesizer), develop the chords and then get a mic and establish the hook. I love it when someone gives me a title or an idea of one, it gives me a place to go; the verses and melody come easy then. I'm a chorus guy, I like to establish the punch line, then I can find out how to weave my way into it.

DW: How did you meet Aretha Franklin?

NMW: Through Clive Davis. He'd known my previous work with Dionne Warwick which, by the way, later taught me how to produce Whitney Houston. Clive came to me and said, "How about Aretha?" I of course, said yes. I called her and we talked for a while. I actually taped the conversation 'cause I didn't want to miss anything. I wanted to hear how she talked... so important later, when I put the music together with her. How one phrases their words in conversation tells you so much about a person.

DW: You were capturing the person's essence, not just the words. Really, what they're all about.

NMW: Yes. A producer is like a boxing coach...it's a psychological thing. You gotta know how to talk to somebody before you get into all the technical stuff in the studio. Lay down a comfort level and know what they're all about. You want their personality to shine. That's why every time I produce a record I feel like I'm starting from scratch. The artist's personality will dictate how I'll start the process. It's always fresh. 



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  - Steve Winwood / *Junction Seven*
  - Starship / *Do You Love Me*
  - Aretha Franklin & Elton John / *Duets*
  - Al Green / *Your Heart's In Good Hands*
  - Elton John / *Duets*
  - Al Jarreau / *Heaven And Earth*
  - Shanice Wilson / *Strictly Business Film Soundtrack*
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  - Lisa Fischer / *So Intense*
  - Regina Belle / *Stay With Me*
  - Gladys Knight / *License To Kill*
  - Clarence Clemons / *Hero*
  - Whitney Houston / *How Will I Know*
  - Aretha Franklin / *Who's Zoomin' Who*
  - Sister Sledge / *All American Girls*
  - Stacy Lattisaw / *With You*
  - Jeff Beck / *Wired*