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ISSUE NO. 1 VOLUME 2
January 11-25, 1974
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Leon Thomas Joins With Santana Black Jazz Fused With Latin Fire

Welcome "is that feeling you have when you finally do reach an awareness, an understanding which you have earned through struggle. It is a feeling of peace. A welcome feeling of peace."

John Coltrane

Now, you ask, what do John Coltrane and Leon Thomas have to do with Santana, anyway?

Well the new Santana album is called "Welcome," after the tune originally performed by John Coltrane on his monumental album, *Kulu Se Mama*. Alice Coltrane stepped in to arrange two of the tunes for "Welcome." And Leon Thomas, who does with his voice what John Coltrane pioneered on the saxophone, is the lead vocalist with Santana on the album and on tour.

"Welcome" has already sold over a million copies, which is significant in that records by John, Alice or Leon alone would never get enough record company exposure to even come close to that. But now, thanks to Santana, millions of people will get a chance to discover the new black music this album is a tribute to. Welcome.

"Welcome" represents yet another step in the new directions of the Woodstock-spawned Santana band, which first surfaced when Carlos did an LP with Mahavishnu John McLaughlin. It's meant as a very spiritual album, right down to the pure white cover. The music begins with an Alice Coltrane religious organ arrangement called "Going Home" and soon slides into the Love, Devotion and Surrender tune first performed by Santana with McLaughlin, this time with lyrics done by Leon.

Putting the record on my first flash was fear of being bored by monotonous "guru" music, but don't let the opening section fool you, this album cooks as it gets going. Carlos' guitar is searing space/latino (McLaughlin plays on one cut), the rhythms are in there and the lyrics are refreshing, especially on the soon to be a single from the album "When I Look Into Your Eyes," sung by Leon.

The Santana album is well worth listening to, but it can't stand up to the original versions of the music. John Coltrane's *Welcome* will take you far beyond this arrangement. And Leon Thomas' vocal feats are only hinted at on the Santana release. So if you like this album check out the real thing, too.

The SUN interviewed Leon Thomas over the phone last week to ask about his new association with a rock and roll band. But first some background.

Leon attributes his first major flash of direction to experiencing the Miles Davis group with John Coltrane on tenor. "He was doing with the horn what I was trying to do with my voice." From there he went to New York and proceeded to sing with Art Blakey and then Count Basie until 1965, while also working with the likes of Roland Kirk, Archie Shepp, Pharoah Sanders and other innovators. But it was his work with Pharoah, especially as represented by the landmark "Karma" album on Impulse ("The Creator Has a Master Plan") that first brought Leon to popular recognition, that is popular in terms of jazz musicians.

Leon is a troubador; there's a message to his improvised screams, chants, yodels and incantations. His more recent recorded efforts can be heard on the Flying Dutchman label, which arranged for this interview, done while Leon was at home in New York City.

SUN: To start out, how did this association with Santana come about.

LEON: Well, they called me up. It was a strange thing. I'd seen a lot of different signs that something was going to happen. I dug something in the sky, a double-rainbow on Friday, and on Monday they called. So I flew out to the West Coast and saw they were extremely serious about their new spiritual insights. We talked, I heard the music which didn't sound bad. I said, "My goodness, you guys want me to sing these songs," and they said, "yeah, man." They had been aware of me for some time because we both performed at the Montreux Jazz Festival in Switzerland in 1970. And Michael Santana — whose name is now Maitreya — had been coming down to the East Village Inn where we were working.

So we rode around for a couple of days and talked, and I came back East to straighten out my music and business, and went back out to the coast to record the album with them and learn their show. Two weeks later

we took off, last June, on a tour of Southeast Asia for two months and then through Latin America for another five weeks. And we just came back from England, Spain and Europe. The only pause in between was when I appeared at the Ann Arbor Festival last summer.

SUN: Who picked the title for the album?

LEON: They did, as a matter of fact, we all did. They don't do anything as one individual, everybody has a part in their structure. That's what amazed me so much. Everybody writes, everybody is a part of the corporation. Whether it's gimmicky or whatever, they are very intent, at the moment that is, time will tell, on cultivating higher consciousness, meditation and things of this nature. And they associated myself with that, along with some of the music Pharoah and I had done, and some



Leon Thomas and Carlos Santana

other jazz music like Alice and Trane. They seemed to be realizing that music was an expression of this, and that the jazz musicians were aware of it and have been doing it for some time, but without the exposure given to rock artists. No matter how much the powers that be behind recordings try to separate artists the same way they try to separate people in public, and they would have us all thinking that we're different. But the musicians are realizing that there is no difference, and are all reaching for the same thing. The group wants to express a certain thing now, oblivious to the fact that somehow the record industry attached militancy to "The Creator Has a Master Plan" which I don't see how when it talks about "Peace and Happiness Through All the Land." These tunes are expression of things other than militancy. It's an urgency, you could call it. So the media didn't give it the wide exposure the song should have had, but Carlos and Michael realized it was like a prayer, and they said hey man, we like what you're doing. So we even do "The Creator" together on tour. Because music is a form of worship. And these guys are into it more so than ever. In fact, Carlos devotes a minute to meditation before we even begin playing, to create vibes in the audience, or he tries to.

SUN: What do you think the reaction in the music in-

dustry is to this new teamwork?

LEON: Shock. I'm sure the musicians themselves anticipated that, and collectively reached out and said, I think Leon can do it. They know because they listen to jazz all the time on their cassettes, to Weather Report, Trane, Pharoah, Herbie, and everybody else. They're always listening. But I'm sure that FM Productions who is their guiding light, and Columbia Records who is their mother of nourishments, didn't go to Santana and say, hey, I know a hell of a jazz artist that we think is very flexible, why don't you get him to sing with you? It was more like they found out and said, "What! Leon Thomas? Are you kidding?" And they kept being adamant about it, but the group said hey this is the cat we want, we've come to this conclusion, all seven of us, and just check it out. Their confidence in the selection sent out a vibe that people were waiting to say, "I told you so." But now that the record is successful everybody's cool. Because they didn't expect it to happen the way it did, with the album produced in record time and the successful tour. I learned the songs in five days and then did the tour. So what the fuck can they say except goddamn, these cats know what they're doing.

SUN: Do you think the success of "Welcome" will change the recording industry's view of promoting jazz artists?

LEON: Well, it behooves them to do anything they have an interest in. Now, perhaps the guys they neglected, that they weren't even thinking of recording, or even looking at, they'll say hey, and now they'll think twice. They'll say hey, if there's any way that these cats from so seemingly different walks of life can tell their set and groove, and all become brothers under the music, say, how can we keep them apart any longer. We got to let them have what they want, because it gives us more money. And that's one thing they have learned not to squabble with, success. Cause that's what they're based on.

SUN: As the people change, they have to change some.

LEON: Right, and they're supposed to anticipate the change. They're supposed to be the brains, but they don't know what the fuck they're doing. They're reactionary cause they're protecting the almighty dollar. They're the damnation in life. And that's what damnation is, when you're stopping the flow. You know, simple. As I said in a song, Shape Your Mind to Die, "The crux of the confusion is/ some people have more than they'll ever need/ while they fill the air with empty shouts/ to hide their lowly greed."

SUN: What are your plans now? Will there be an American tour with the band?

LEON: We're waiting to hear about that now. But I've got a brand new album coming out, called *Full Circle*. We did nine tunes; two Jackson Five tunes, one Stevie Wonder, one B.B. King, one Johnny Ace, one of my own, one collaboration with Neil Crickey and one Neil Crickey original. You see I hate to be categorized. I can't sing the blues; I can sing it all. Which is another reason why I took this Santana gig. Cause there's a challenge there, cause people always try to limit you categorically, and somehow also economically. And I want to see what they can say now having sung with Basie, and Pharoah and now with Santana. How would they categorize it?

There's one tune on the new album which I've had around for years which I'm glad to get on wax. It deals with the energy crisis before it happened, a slow thing with just piano and voice. The lyrics go:

*Can't you hear the troubled cry of the tortured sea?
The birds on high and the air we breathe
Mother is dying, what are we going to do
Mother Nature is crying, what are we going to do
How long will man ignore what he feels inside?
And lose his soul for the sake of pride
When it's love we should be enjoying
It's our world we're destroying
While it's love we should be desiring
While time is expiring
What are we going to do?*

by David Fenton