

JANUARY 29, 1988
ISSUE NO. 275

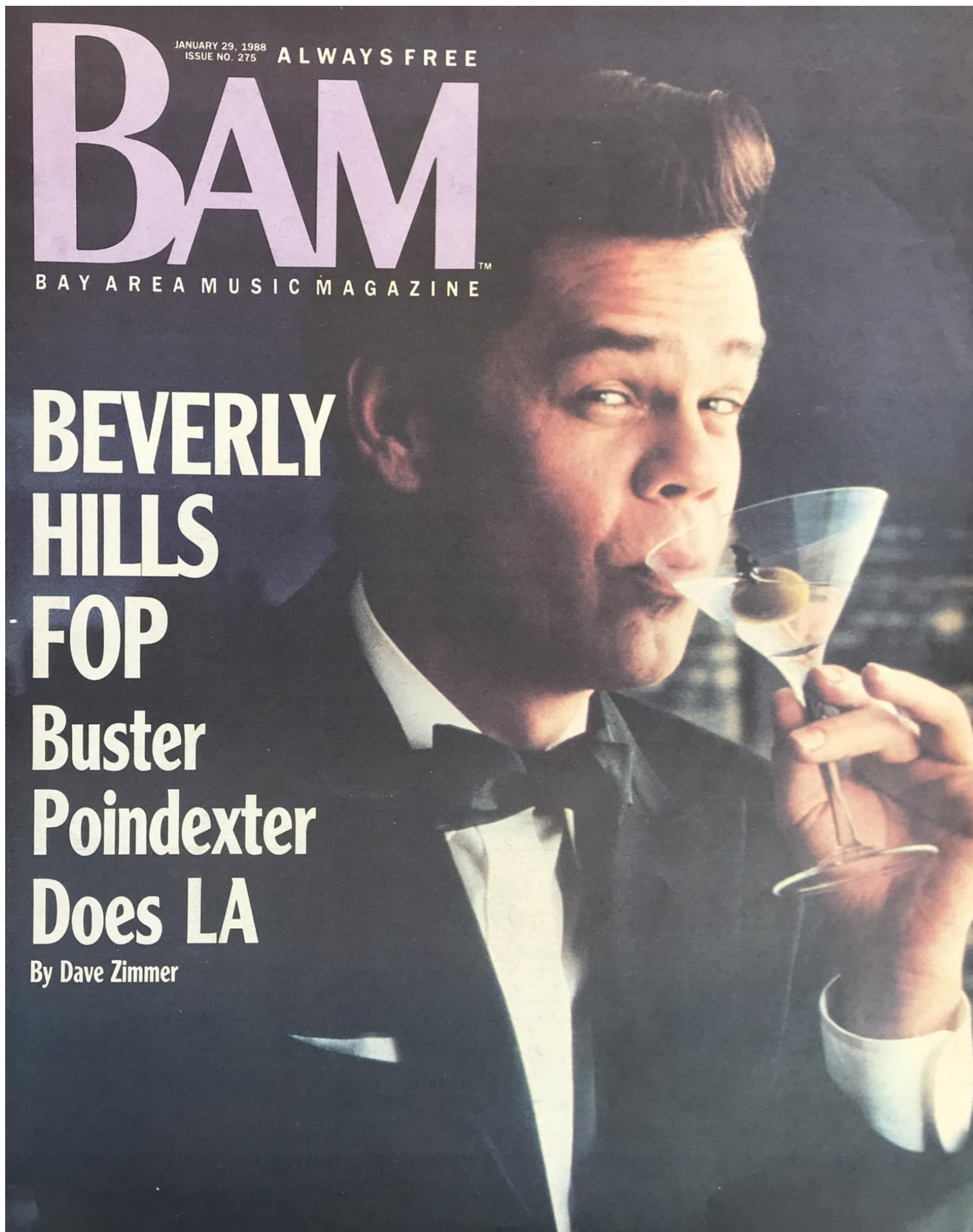
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By Dave Zimmer



BLUES FOR CARLOS

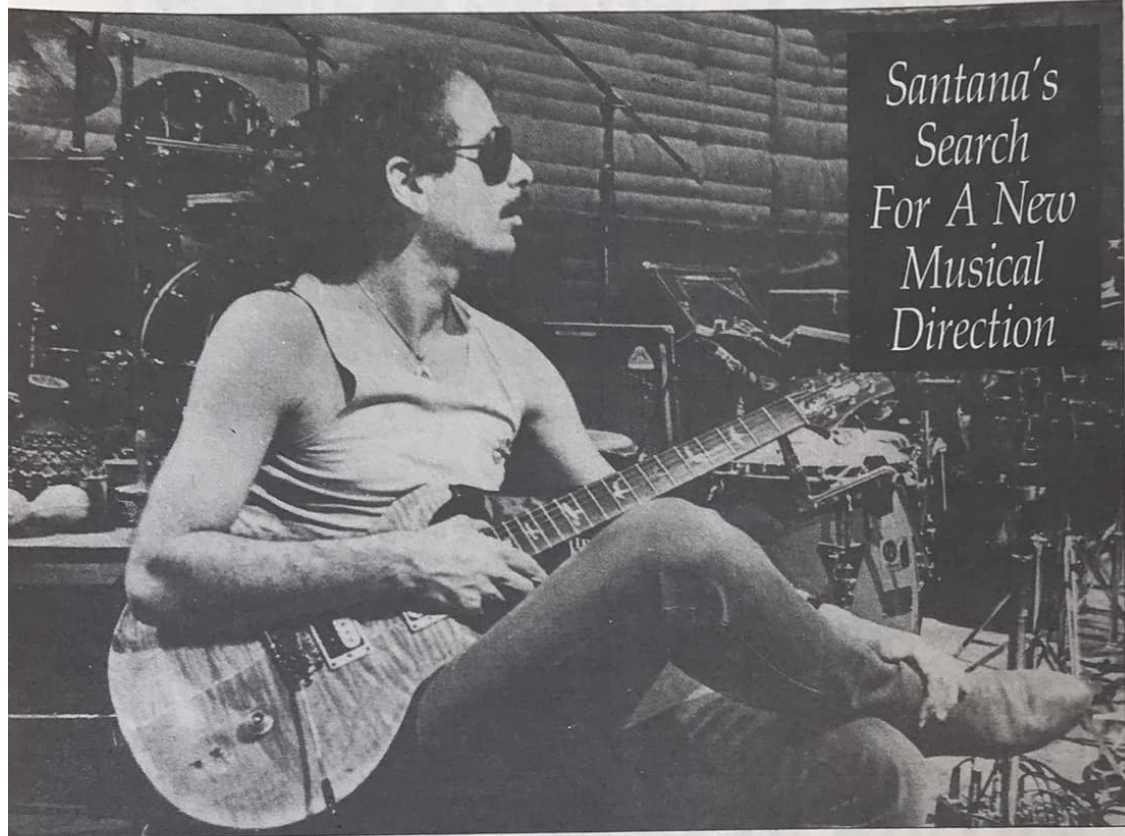


PHOTO: ERIK WEBER

Santana's Search For A New Musical Direction

By Steve Stolder

Carlos Santana is ready to talk after a morning of poring over old recordings made by his band over the course of 20 years. Seated in a cluttered studio at the Plant in Sausalito, dressed in black sweat pants and a black sweat shirt with the intense visage of John Coltrane across the front, Santana looks much like the slight young man who, with an integrated band of Bay Area musicians, emerged a couple of decades back with a series of hit albums and singles that merged Spanish rhythms with the drive of rock and the passion of the blues. Like the Santana of the Woodstock era, his hair still hangs wildly to his shoulders; today, however, it is thinning in front and gray strands mix with black.

Santana has been occupied with a three-record project that's expected to hit the streets in spring—a 20-year retrospective of a group whose one constant has been the man who gives the band its name. He confesses that he's excited by the project for two reasons: One is the vast well of music, much of it recorded live (when Santana believes the band is at its best)

to choose from. For a man keenly aware of music and its history dating back to the blues and jazz masters of the '40s, '50s and '60s, it's a chance to place his music and that of his many collaborators in context. The other reason, he adds, is that it provides a starting point for a new Santana—the solo artist not the band.

"I'm just starving," he says with customary passion. "The reason I'm putting this 20-year perspective is, I feel in my heart, to put a closed chapter on Santana."

Does that mean that the group Santana is no more?

"Pretty much. [I want to] embrace totally new material. New music. New everything. It comes to an end every album I do. There will always be a Santana as far as what it stands for....What I'm saying is I need a whole new repertoire, a whole new vision, a whole new concept. That's what I'm starving for."

A strong hint to that fresh direction can be found in *Blues For Salvador*, a solo album released last year hard on the heels of *Freedom*, the 17th group album, released in February of '87. While *Freedom* is clearly the more accessible effort, it's *Blues For Salvador* that boasts a vigorous, more personal

sound. Almost entirely instrumental, the LP showcases Santana's distinctive guitar and offers strong nods toward the 40-year-old artist's many musical heroes: Wes Montgomery, Charles Mingus, John Coltrane and T-Bone Walker. "Everybody tells me that the voice they like best is my guitar. Which is a great compliment to me and it pulled my coat to something I never saw before. I'm always accommodating singers and percussion people and the last thing I think of is myself. Like a traffic cop. It seems, in the past, like I always found myself conducting traffic between the musicians and the producer. I'm not interested in that anymore."

Santana is also clearly less interested in the pop wars of '80s. His conversation is peppered with references to past heroes and contemporary jazz men like Miles Davis, Herbie Hancock and Wayne Shorter. Conversely, when he's asked about current chart-toppers, his responses take on a biting quality.

"Now they want you to just put on a show like a bear juggling. You know, leotards and makeup," he says of today's music scene. "That stuff, it's OK for entertainment, it's OK for Las Vegas. But for real music, I'll take

a musician who plays at Macy's on Christmas before I'll take any of that stuff, because a guy in the street at Macy's at Christmas, he's playing you what he really feels and he's not hiding. Where a lot of people, they hide a lot. They hide their true talent with how they dress or how they do certain things—the image kind of thing."

And who does he blame for this perceived shift of attitudes in the music? "People who don't have an ear for music," Santana responds without hesitation. "They only have an ear for the cash register. It's just a lot of people who are too bigoted and narrow-minded—not thinking about art but thinking like General Motors."

The antidote for Santana is a shift away from pop music and toward a more complex sound. For Santana, the highpoints of a 20 year career haven't been releasing hit albums like *Santana* or *Abraxas*; they haven't been appearances before massive audiences at Woodstock or Watkins Glen. What comes immediately to mind are opportunities to play with Miles Davis and Herbie Hancock.

"That's what stands out to me the most because, you know, in my heart I know the order and the values, and I know that all the music is important from Coltrane to Miles to John Lee Hooker. At the same time, if music is the universal language, the most intelligent and soulful—it is jazz... because it deals with total spontaneity and it's the perfect balance of vitality, heart, soul, intellect. Blues and certain things require you to just feel it. You don't have to be Einstein but you have to feel it. You have to compensate by having twice as much feeling like John Lee or Muddy Waters, for all the other chord changes you might not be getting....But the most elite—it is jazz. It is people like Miles Davis and Wayne Shorter who for me are the highest mountains."

When the three-album Santana retrospective is completed, he hopes to tour with Shorter and Brazilian musician Milton Nascimento. He's also planning a project that'll bring John Lee Hooker together with the Berkeley Symphony. And he adds that he's not leaving rock 'n' roll behind forever. Despite his dismay with its current state, Santana says its still in his blood.

"I did grow up in an era, the '50s and the '60s, Ruby and the Romantics, 'Our Day Will Come.' So I like all kinds of music that I feel teenagers will love when they're driving around in the car, the first time they touch hands or the first time they kiss. There's something beautiful about that." □