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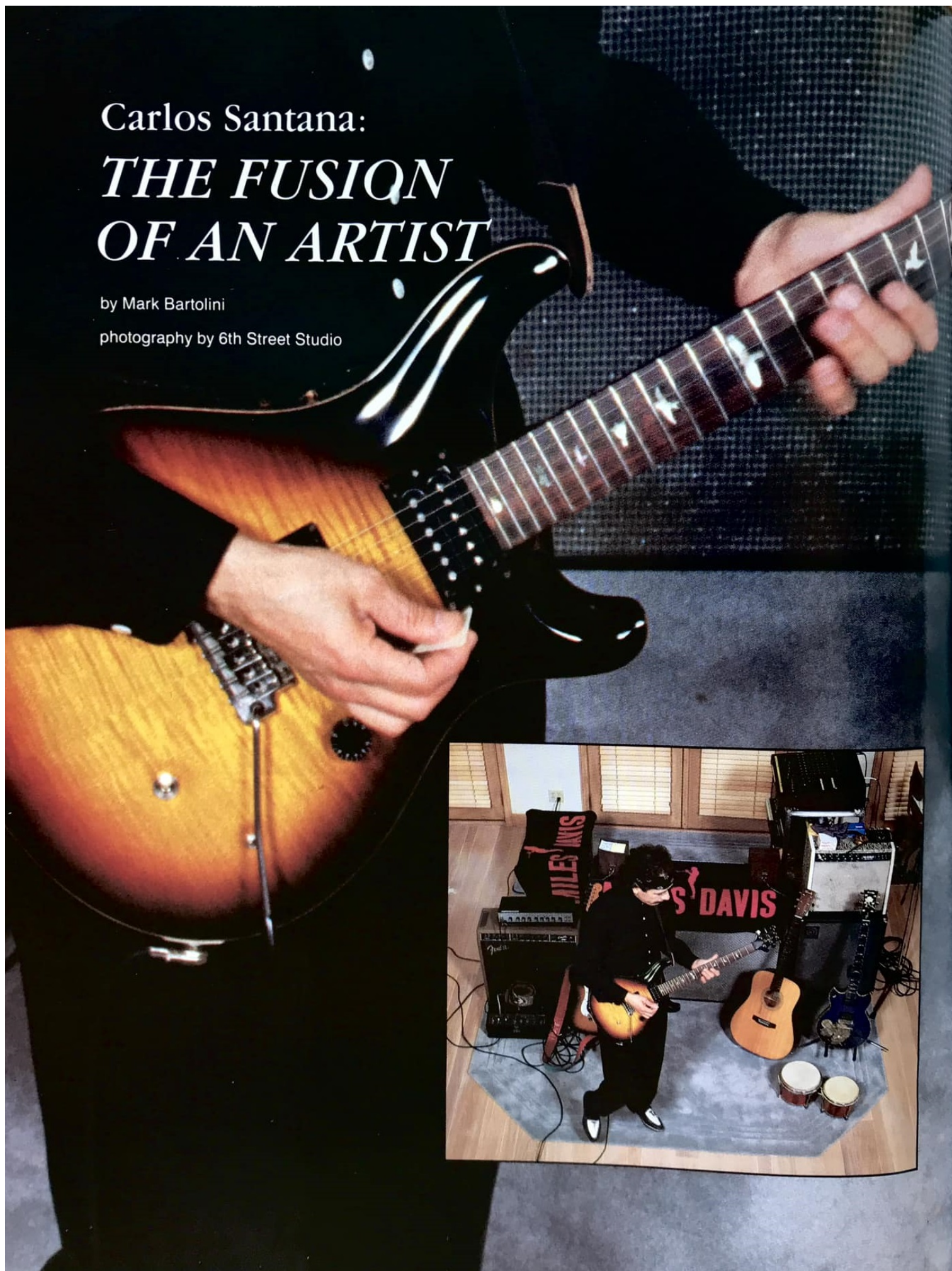
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Carlos Santana: *THE FUSION OF AN ARTIST*

by Mark Bartolini

photography by 6th Street Studio



PROFILE

SANTANA

With one deft motion she let her bra slip to the floor and soon, with her body writhing to an overpowering blues beat, the remainder of her clothing came to rest on the sawdust strewn floor. But her aggravated gyrations were to little avail; the seduction of the audience was being accomplished by a thirteen year old boy and the cries reverberating from his electric guitar. Carlos Santana went to school on Revolution Street in Tiju-

ana. He learned what it takes to evolve as a musician from blues players who would come from as far away as San Jose to play in Tijuana's strip joints. At thirteen he had left his parents and was immersed in the blues.

Nearly ten years later Carlos delivered his legendary and revolutionary "Soul Sacrifice" performance before a crowd of 400,000 at Woodstock. His band, SANTANA, became synony-

mous with quality and integrity in music. Carlos's unique style and incomparable tone led to fourteen gold and nine platinum records. He has recorded over twenty-five albums, with more than twenty-five million copies sold world-wide. This year Carlos won his first GRAMMY

(below) Carlos's extensive musical library provides the foundation for his continual study of music. (left) A portrait of the artist. After 20 years Carlos still can't wait to get up every morning and play his guitar.



for rock instrumental album of the year and he won yet another BAMMY for musician of the year. SANTANA performed at such landmark concerts as Woodstock, Altamont, the US Festival, Live-Aid, Amnesty International, and the 1987 Soviet-American Concert in Moscow.

Yet Carlos seems almost afraid to acknowledge his past successes. His humility is a product of his spirituality and the fear that his ego may rise up and consume him—destroying his music—as has occurred with so many other artists. His numerous awards and mounted gold and platinum records have been tossed into a basement closet of his new studio, fondly dubbed “The Electric Church.”

Standing in front of their new tudor style home, Carlos, his wife of sixteen years Deborah, son Salvador and daughter Stella evoke the stereotypical image of an upscale suburban American family. It is only when you enter his house or “The Electric

Church” with its ever present aroma of incense, pictures of Jesus, stained glass windows, and life-size neon replicas of some of Carlos’s favorite musicians that you really meet Carlos the man. A man whose spirituality, love of family and revolutionary spirit have fused into a sensitive, complex artist pursuing a vision that, while pleasing his fans, will never leave him fulfilled.

Carlos strives for the perfect tone: the music playing through his subconscious rather than he consciously playing the music. “I feel raw. I haven’t found the tone completely that I hear inside. If you hold a perfect piece of glass against the sun it will reflect all the colors of the rainbow—I am only getting yellows and oranges and it’s driving me crazy. Tone is the way I will heal. The best music comes when I have no notion of what key I am in, what planet I am on, what I am wearing, who I am—nothing. You’re kind of like an antenna, a conductor

for your instrument; you don’t block or clutter it with your own thing—you become a perfect host.” Carlos lives for this moment, but he admits: “To this day I am still trying to learn to replicate this freedom; it’s an articulation which we can flirt with, but can’t leash.”

Carlos’s tone is the signature of his music. It is the element which keeps his music fresh—and in the public ear after more than two decades. “The only way you’re going to last,” states Carlos, “is by embracing music which is eternal, like that by Cole Porter, George Gershwin and Duke Ellington. It has a childlike rhythm ‘staying forever young,’ as Bob Dylan puts it, that is essential if music is going to endure.” John Coltrane, Miles Davis, Jimi Hendrix, John Lee Hooker, Armando Peraza, Wayne Shorter and Pharoah Sanders, to name just a few, have all contributed to Carlos’s developing his own voice on the guitar. Their images surround Carlos in his studio, a reminder that only by being a student of his peers will his tone continue to evolve.

As anyone who has seen Carlos play can attest, he puts his soul into his music. He feels that he has a responsibility to be consistent in the quality of his music. “When I play my guts hurt from trying to make people happy. A lot of people say ‘Oh baloney’ but it’s true. When I finish playing my guts are raw.” Carlos’s anguish when he plays transcends physical and emotional exhaustion—he connects with his audience on a level it can sense is sincere. The audience knows that creating art, not producing hits, is Carlos’s greatest aspiration.

Surrounded by pictures of Christ, Carlos meditates in his studio, “The Electric Church.”



Carlos does not believe that being an artist precludes commercial success. He distinguishes a positive "natural" process of commercialism from a negative Hollywood papier mâché approach. "The combination of talent and incentive to develop your imagination—to find that need that everyone has to have—that's positive. This natural incentive can come from anywhere: colors, aroma, texture and the senses you have been given to explore and create from these elements. Then there are the people who don't know that we artists know the difference between artists and con-artists," Carlos warns. "You can tell why certain people want to do certain things, whether to glorify themselves or just make money. There is no art to greed. The music you hear in an elevator or a shopping mall, that's not music, that's like somebody burping in your face," laughs Carlos.

Carlos feels that Americans are far behind their European and Japanese counterparts in appreciating quality music. "America is an amalgamation of cultures and people who produce the best music on the planet. Yet we are way behind in our musical education. We still have that 'drive-in' mentality which leads us to read comic books instead of admiring the Mona Lisa." Still, Carlos believes that all serious musicians must come to America in order to improve their music. "It's like spending six months in New York learning to drive a cab—this is the proving ground. But it takes more than talent to make it today. You need a vision."

For Carlos this vision has led him to music that creates a marriage between the flesh and the spirit. He sees worthwhile music penetrating deeper than the skin and opening people's ears to their emotions. Carlos's own emotions were in turmoil in the early seventies. With the deaths of Jimi Hendrix, Janis Joplin and Jim Morrison from drug over-doses, Carlos turned to religion as a way to avoid their fate and to give him the discipline he felt he needed to improve



Carlos with wife Deborah, daughter Stella and son Salvador in front of their new Marin home.

his music. He became a follower of Sri Chinmoy, an Indian guru, and began his journey into Eastern religion. "Freedom comes from discipline," stresses Carlos, "unless you're John McEnroe," he adds with a grin.

In 1981 Carlos changed his spiritual direction. "I wanted to renew my relationship with Jesus. Once you smell the aroma of His presence you want it again. All we have to do is believe. This is very real to me. I learn what it is to be a man everyday. I am constantly thanking the Lord for my family, friends, health and success."

Perhaps one of the most important aspects of Carlos's spirituality is the time he spends meditating each day. "You tune your guitar; you have to tune yourself. You can't play your instrument if it or you are out of tune," Carlos stresses. He concedes that pressure has at times caused him

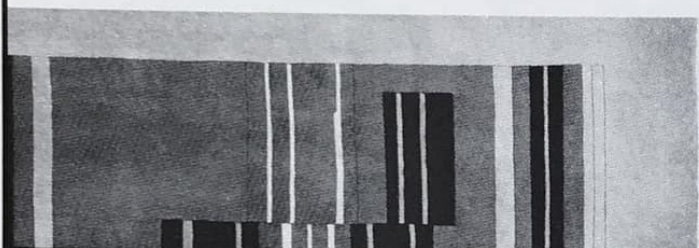

to have a sharp tongue and a short temper. "People throw a lot of things on you in this business. There is jealousy, resentment, worship—it can make you arrogant, cynical and callous. I find meditation a means of letting go of all this."

Carlos acknowledges that there are sacrifices to living with musicians. "Musicians seem like they are constantly waging their own inner war. We can be very temperamental people, constantly tempering our moods into creating something beautiful. But a lot of times you get caught in them and they bite you and then you bite other people back." Fortunately for Carlos, his wife Deborah helps them both generate "spiritual traction," a phrase which her father Saunders King coined. She is deeply rooted in spirituality; her grandparents, the King family, founded one of the first



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churches in Oakland at the turn of the century. "I am very grateful for my wife," Carlos declares. "She is very strong and beautiful, both inwardly and outwardly. As Bob Dylan says," Carlos quotes laughing, "I know I don't deserve it, but thank you anyway Lord."

Carlos boasts an extended family from which to find spiritual and musical inspiration. His mother taught him that everything is borrowed from the Lord. He likes to say that he has four fathers. His father, who taught him the fundamentals of music and that life is service, still plays his violin at The Cantina in Mill Valley. His father-in-law, Saunders King, is a legendary blues musician. Armando Peraza is the percussionist of SANTANA and Carlos's close friend. They, along with renowned musical explorer Miles Davis, have all influenced Carlos tremendously, both personally and professionally.

While Carlos's spirituality has changed direction over the years, his social commitment has remained steadfast. "I feel I am more of a revolutionary today because everyone was in the sixties. You would have to be numb and dumb to be neutral in the sixties and early seventies. There was Vietnam, Watergate and you would turn on the TV and see Buddhist monks setting themselves on fire. You can't just turn your head and say 'life is groovy,'" Carlos asserts. His own anger over injustice in the world led him to identify with Latin American revolutionary Che Guevara for a time in the sixties, "but I saw what was happening. There were a lot of victims—children in the middle who had nothing to do with communism or imperialism—a lot of people being killed."

Carlos modified his revolutionary fervor patterning it more after Martin Luther King or Gandhi than Che Guevara. And instead of fighting the system he began fighting apathy within the system. "Because I have children, I have to be involved with their future," Carlos states passion-



Carlos with his close friend and business associate Bruce Kuhlman in front of a car which Carlos calls "a car made for highway 1"—a rare convertible Citroën

ately. "As artists we have to pull our weight together in order to change problems in society. I don't want to hurt anybody; I just want to change the conditions." For Carlos that means exposing greed, corruption and social problems as well as contributing both privately and publicly. He recently raised \$100,000 for the returning refugees of El Salvador in his "Blues For Salvador" concert and gave a performance for the inmates of San Quentin.

His concert at San Quentin was the result of a 1977 concert at Soledad Prison with Joan Baez. "There was an attitude among the inmates at Soledad that we were there to glorify ourselves." People walked out on

them and returned to their cells. "It hurt me to the point that I didn't want to do anything for those people again," Carlos admits. But, feeling

"The best music comes when I have no notion of what key I am in, what planet I am on . . . who I am—nothing."

that he had failed the prisoners and betrayed the legacy of the band, Carlos decided to perform at San Quentin. "I want to change those people. I know people say that I would not feel that way if they had

hurt my family. Maybe not. But I do know that I have to try to melt their hearts because they are going to come out sooner or later."

The inmates of San Quentin at first reacted like those at Soledad. "They had their arms crossed and their hands clenched around their arms like, 'do something man,'" Carlos recalled. "We started playing and pretty soon they've got their hands in their pockets and then the next thing you know they've raised their hands in the air like they're at church. That's when I realized music can work; it can break all that hate and the walls that separate people. Woodstock was not my highest achievement. San

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Quentin was my highest achievement."

SANTANA has always represented a breaking down of barriers with its racial mix of band members and ethnic fusion of music. "I believe that there are very few bands that can go to Moscow or San Quentin and represent what we do—to get it over to those people," Carlos states. "Woodstock epitomized that idealism of the tribes coming together. Bill Graham told us that before we even hit one note we would show that Blacks, Chicanos, Cubans and Anglos can work together," Carlos reminisces. "People listened that day; they witnessed the aspirations and culminations of a generation of music fans."

"Woodstock was not my highest achievement. San Quentin was my highest achievement."

Carlos's relationship with Bill Graham has remained close. "Everything he has done has been to further me as a person and my career. But, especially now that I have children, I have to take more responsibility for my professional life. I will not let anyone dilute the vision that I have with my music. To me life is not a business, it's art. Art is first."

Carlos's commitment to his art became evident at age thirteen when he stayed behind in Tijuana while his family moved to San Francisco. "I stayed behind in Tijuana for music and the feeling that I was a man. I could watch grown women strip and everybody doing their thing," Carlos recalls. Learning how to play the Blues was more important to Carlos than "being a kid hanging around people who listened to surf music. That really would have destroyed my morale. Those people musically were about as deep as a spoon."

His family's immigration to America, which Carlos paid for with



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the money he earned in Tijuana's strip joints, ultimately brought Carlos to the Bay Area and Marin where he has lived for the past twenty years. "The more I travel the faster I want to get back to America. Especially here in Marin, this is God's country." Carlos feels at home because of the abundance of artists living here, and hopes that less celebrated artists receive more encouragement from the community. "I miss the way Sausalito street artists would come out on weekends to sell their leather goods or ceramics, and people would say 'hey I didn't know you did that.' I miss the fact that they are not acknowledged or supported as much today," Carlos laments. He then becomes silent as he is asked, despite his wry sense of humor and positive attitude, is he content?

On his hill, in the tudor-style "Electric Church" Carlos sits, staring. He is surrounded by musical and spiritual inspiration. The ever present clouds of incense float through the expanse, wafting up past pictures of Christ, filtering through the blankets with Miles Davis emblazoned in red up through the neon arms of Jimi Hendrix and John Coltrane, past stained glass windows and finally settling in a pocket of sawdust high up in the rafters of the newly constructed studio. "I am not happy. I should be. But I am not content with myself. There is a side of me that feels like it is going to break down and cry any moment because I feel like I can do more."

Carlos will remain an enigma. To paraphrase Edward R. Murrow, Carlos is 'living a life—not an apology.' For some, the creativity which compels his artistic explorations will be misunderstood. For others, those who have stereotyped him because they find elements about him or his past offensive or threatening, his message and talent may never be heard. For many, his legacy—why he plays, and how well he articulates the moment—will endure. ♦

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Pictured above left to right: Robert O'Connor, artist and unique wall glazes; Mitchel Berman, custom cabinetry and fine furniture; Sharon Campbell, ASID, designer.

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