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STILL IN THE GAME

This has been a year of comebacks for original guitar heroes, a return to prominence for players who ignited the '60s and early '70s with their electrified blues riffs. Jimmy Page wrote his first new chapter since the demise of Zeppelin. Eric Clapton finally made a comeback album he won't have to defend a year from now. Ritchie Blackmore pulled out all the stops in a reformed and revitalized Deep Purple. And Jeff Beck, Mr. Recluse, played with everybody (Jagger, Turner, Box Of Frogs), including his own band. Even Leslie West dropped some poundage and reformed Mountain for a generation of MTV watchers.

One original guitar hero who didn't make a comeback splash was Carlos Santana. He never left. Beyond Appearances, his 15th band album, finds the guitarist and company continuing to fine tune their balance of pop covers with sinuous guitar jams. A consistently hot live band, Santana have rarely caught it on record. On stage the sparks are ignited by musicians actually playing together (in the jazz sense) rather than lip-synching by rote. These guys catch a fire few bands can match. Sadly, the same high level of interplay is almost impossible to capture in the studio with today's overdub-by-overdub approach.

So here is a band you *have* to see live, but without a hit single, how do they sustain momentum on the road? Even when they hit big with "Winning" a few years back, the band dropped it from the set early on and nobody missed it! At the same time, without new material, the Santana band runs the risk of entering the legendary category of the last Allman Brothers Band, where the new material didn't match the classics, which would be out of place on current AOR radio formats.

Carlos Santana's answer to all of this is to just go on with what he believes is the truth: singing a guitar line that swoops, soars and sails with grace and agility and speaks in a tongue that transcends all languages.

CARLOS SANTANA

by Jack Colby

This article originally appeared in Guitar For The Practicing Musician, October '85.

GUITAR: Which of your contemporaries still knocks you out the most?

CARLOS: Of all the musicians I've heard after Jimi Hendrix, Jimmy Page is still the greatest to me. I'm finding out that vision is the most important thing. I'm still making up my mind about the Firm, but I think Jimmy Page has got the best vision for rock the way I like to play it. That's saying a lot because there are great guys out there, like Van Halen. But none of them have those mansions, those huge things that Jimmy Page makes.

His vision of composition knocks me out. The way he puts chords together on *Led Zeppelin* right through *In Through the Out Door* is classic stuff. It's symphonic. The principle is what makes everybody stand up and transcend themselves. The principle is what makes *Black Magic Woman* or *Johnny B. Goode* or any song from the past, important to the present. Songs are like cups and glasses and plates. It's what you put inside each day for people to eat that's important about those songs. You can change

the arrangement but it's still the same plate, same song. There's only seven notes and what's important is what you bring to them.

GUITAR: How important is the sound of your guitar to getting the message across?

CARLOS: The tone of your guitar can attract or repel. The tone is your face, your signature, your identity. You can have everything but if you don't have a tone you're missing 90% of the thing. I love Ry Cooder's tone. I went to see him open for Eric Clapton. The

people were walking to get beer and hot dogs and as soon as Ry Cooder took the first note of his first solo everybody stopped and looked at him. When his solo was over they started walking again. Certain tones make your hair stand up and you don't have to play as much. That tells you something about priorities. When you're striking a note you're not just using your finger on a string. Just like we have five fingers, we are all made up of five elements, the heart, soul, mind, body and cojones. You need to have

all of those in your playing but I think the soul should be the most dominant. If you're soulful you're like candy to bees. If you're soulful you have a better chance than if you're brilliant but not soulful.

GUITAR: *Europa* and *Samba Pa Ti* are two instrumentals that can make hair stand on end. Many of us are waiting for the next one.

CARLOS: I finally wrote another song that may be like those two. They are very strong in the sense that when you hear the first two notes you can react.

This one is called *Love Is You*. I wrote it on the road in Florida. I tape everything and when I go home I put it all on cassette so I have a file. When I finally listened to it I thought, this one has got the stuff. When you first hear it, it sounds like an old friend and you want to stay around for a while. Thank God I finally wrote another one or another one finally came out.

In fact, I would like to talk about how songs come to the musician. We have antennas like on a car radio. It's what allowed Beethoven to hear the



SANTANA

opening notes of his Fifth Symphony from way out in the cosmos and put it down on the piano. There's three things that make it easier to write—if it's late at night when the whole world is crashed out; being in a shower; or moving in a car on the freeway or in a plane. Your antennas seem to be more attuned to the inner music during those times. People need to understand this because they can put it to work, and we need more writers.

GUITAR: Do you ever just sit down and write?

CARLOS: No, that's too frustrating. You know when it's coming because when you listen back, it doesn't sound like anybody but you. I feel like a kid when I write a new song and I know Eric (Clapton) is going to like it. It's grace. Nobody can just sit down and come up with hit after hit. If you reach somebody and make them cry, it's a hit. It doesn't matter how people buy it.

GUITAR: Can you remember the time when you discovered your tone and sound?

CARLOS: There was a process of getting it. I've been aware of my sound since I was in Tijuana, but not to the full extent of what it is now. It didn't burst into reality until I saw B.B. King live at the Fillmore West. He got a standing ovation without playing a note. When he hit his first note I saw in his face what it was about. His face told me the time and place when he first got that feeling. That's when my sound came alive with more conviction. Before that it was like being a kid and aping somebody. When you see somebody live, go home and try to get that sound, all of a sudden that sound becomes your sound. It's like I took from B.B. King and he took certain things from T-Bone Walker. It's a chain. To me T-Bone Walker is like the guy who invented the shoe and everybody else created a style. He was playing the guitar between his legs, with his teeth, using feedback and putting on a show back in the 30s and 40s. I got the chance to see Jimi, Gabor (Szabo), and B.B., and learned from all of them. If you're going to learn, learn from the best. Then as we've talked about before, you've got to separate yourself from these people and get your own sound. But it's all positive. The only time it's negative is if you rip somebody off and don't give them credit. I always give everybody credit.

GUITAR: Have you felt any curiosity

toward learning new techniques like tapping?

CARLOS: I like some of the new things people are doing. Some of it seems like I have a new car with chrome mags and that kind of thing. Some of the technique is different. Stanley Jordan does the tapping really well. I don't like it when guitarists ramble on so much; it's like hearing a guy talking with his mouth full. There is music to impress you and music to inspire you. That music impresses me but it does not necessarily inspire me.

GUITAR: Yet you've recently taken up using the tremolo bar?

CARLOS: The tremolo bar is different—it's like smearing paint. It's like using a camera with a fisheye lens. It distorts and does different things. I'm only opposed when that's all people use, because I like variety. I like it when people touch all of my parts. I think Eddie Van Halen is extremely important because he can transcend the Van Halen band. He can play with anybody. With a lot of heavy metal bands, it's just a start. To me the best metal is still from Led Zeppelin. AC/DC came pretty close, but I don't know what they're doing now. I'm learning through my nephew about the beautiful things that Randy Rhoads did. Everybody has something important to say but sooner or later you've got to slow down and tell the truth anyway. It's that basic. At some point you've got to say this note is for you instead of I'm going to play a million notes.

GUITAR: But you still play a lot of notes?

CARLOS: Yes, but there's a way to do it. It's important to balance all of it rather than just feed yourself Cheerios morning, noon and night. Balance is what I look for in a musician. That's why I like Jimmy Page's compositions the best. I like it when people take more time to edit themselves so when they get down and play a lot of notes it means something.

GUITAR: How far have you come in your own learning process?

CARLOS: I need to learn more about harmony. Miles (Davis) and Herbie (Hancock) are harmonic monsters. I need to learn more about chords and inversions. I'm attracted more to bebop and slow ballads because their structure is elegant. Again Jimmy Page is fascinating. The chords are loud but his choice of moods is incredible.

GUITAR: Will you seek these new ideas out and study them?

CARLOS: It happens when it happens. You can lead a horse to water but it's not going to drink unless it's thirsty. Right now I'm getting that thirst. I am getting to that point where I need to

learn more chords. Opposites attract. People who play a lot of chords want to play more thematic. I know thematically I can say two or three things and it fits. I need to play inversions of those notes that open different doors.

GUITAR: In the past you've mentioned Johnny Mathis and Dionne Warwick as being important influences on your phrasing. Are there any new artists that have as strong an impact on you today?

CARLOS: The way Sting and Cyndi Lauper phrase is important. The Talking Heads are important. There's also a lot of bands that will end up like Freddie and the Dreamers. Some people rely more and more on music, others more on production. The most important influences on my phrasing are still John Coltrane, Miles and the blues players.

GUITAR: You have definite ideas about how to approach your sound and songwriting. Are you as clear in your criteria for choosing which songs to record?

CARLOS: A lot of it is chemistry. We all get together and try out a bunch of material to see which is going to balance the best for whatever we're doing. For example, if you're Pat Metheny recording for ECM you don't worry much about the top 40. With a company like CBS it's important to deliver something that gives them assurance that it will be worth their while to do an album of experimenting.

GUITAR: Are you describing the difference between a Santana band album and a Carlos Santana solo record?

CARLOS: There's not that much of a difference. One is my left leg, the other my right. If I would be playing in a band where I could be doing just my kind of music, eventually I would like to play with a band that plays like Santana. Again, it's the balance.

There's music for people and music for musicians. It's that simple, and I like to balance both of them. Maybe someday it can be just one direction but right now, that's the way it works.

GUITAR: It's a fact that you've had trouble capturing the live spirit of this band on record.

CARLOS: This is a live band and it's hard to find a producer who will record us the way we like to record. We always find ourselves accommodating the producer more than they accommodate us. We don't want them to go crazy and end up in a rubber room. They're afraid to a certain extent because most of them are geared to simplify things so that a layman can understand it. A lot of times they short change the listener by trying to sec-

and guess what they'll accept. People like when you take chances. They go to a circus and like it when you're walking a tightrope and it looks like you're going to fall. If you walk the tightrope in your dreams it's boring. The fact is, this is a live band and I think the next album will be produced by ourselves and will probably be live, because that is when this band comes alive. We like to create things on the spot. That's where the magic is, sticking your neck out.

GUITAR: Why can't it be done in the studio?

CARLOS: Once in a while we go to L.A. to see if we can learn something and every time I learn that they don't have the vision, technology or facilities. The ear has a way of hearing things that you don't hear even with the most sophisticated microphones. Since that's true, it's also a fact that there's a whole attitude that you have to capture. A lot of times that attitude is shortchanged in the studio because of fear.

GUITAR: It sounds like you're working with producers who . . .

CARLOS: Don't understand the band! We keep trying. It's like dating. You keep trying to find the right person. I learned a lot about how to use the board to get a bigger sound from working with Keith Jones and Val Garay. I think I'm ready to produce the next album with the help of Jim Gaines. It will be live in the studio. I can record more live than they do because I'm not afraid to blow speakers. That's okay, just put in a new one. Most producers think analytical and soundwise. Sometimes when you play live the sound goes out the window and what you concentrate on is the performance. What they concentrate on is the sound. So to me to try to get both is the goal. We've gotten it on some songs—*Brotherhood, Spirit, Right Now, Touchdown Raiders, Body Surfing* and *Aquamarine*. Everything has its chemistry and you might play a solo that is really hard to copy because everything falls into place. It's like the band is constantly going through a process of trial and error, and I don't mind losing a lot of people because we are learning. Hopefully, later we can catch up and meet again. I have a lot of self confidence in this band playing in front of or after anybody—the Stones, Prince, Tina Turner, anybody. That's my confidence. When you see a Santana concert it's like watching Edwin Moses. You're not watching him rehearse; you're watching him break a record.

GUITAR: You've done a fair amount of sitting in during the last year (Bob

Dylan, Jimmy Page). Is it easier to jam with other artists because the weight is not on you to be "Santana?"

CARLOS: I don't look at it like that. When somebody invites me to play, it's like they have a pool and they want me to come in and get wet. That's what I want to do, dive in. You have to do the best to stimulate, inspire and motivate the other musicians and yourself. You're there to complement and enhance, not to flex your muscles and try to outscore anybody. I've jammed twice this year with John Lee Hooker and it's absolute magic. I've seen Prince, the Firm, Tina Turner and jammed with John Lee Hooker. From my point of view, John Lee Hooker and Tina had me going from the first note to the last. It was like going to church on a positive side.

GUITAR: Hooker's backing is sparse compared to the Santana band.

CARLOS: Sometimes I feel like doing something like that. Someday I would like to do an album for lovers that is just ballads. Right now I want to write some more rock tunes. I like the way Miles records some of the rock feels on his new album. I loved some of the things on the Firm record. Cream's *White Room* is great. There's a lot of good Jimi, but the all time best rock song is *Rock and Roll* by Led Zeppelin.

GUITAR: Are there other great rock songs you can think of from recent times?

CARLOS: The last three Police albums have a lot of great rock things on them. I like upbeat things, almost punk things that shake you up. The Sex Pistols were really important because they opened the doors for a lot of other bands. Record companies will not sign anybody unless somebody breaks ground first. They said, hey the Sex Pistols did pretty good, maybe we should check out those guys with green hair. Jimi Hendrix used to have green hair. I like the Talking Heads, especially *Remain in Light*, because it sounds like three of my favorite bands, The Doors, James Brown and Miles's *On the Corner* band.

GUITAR: Word is out that you've started another solo record?

CARLOS: I did a couple of tracks with Chester Thompson, Tony Williams and Pat O'Hearn from Missing Persons. I also have material we did earlier with Keith Jones, Tom Coster and Chester Thompson. I'd like to have Patti LaBelle and Jimmy Cliff sing on it. Lord willing, we are going to travel this year with Miles Davis and John Lee Hooker. Then I'd also love to play with McCoy Tyner and Jimmy Page. Those are all goals of mine.

GUITAR: Let's talk shop. The Paul Reed Smith guitar has been your main instrument for a while now.

CARLOS: Since 1979. The Paul Reed is the tenor; I use it for straight ahead crunch. The Yamaha SBG-3000 is the soprano; it's more tender, more feminine and I use it for ballads. It's got old Gibson PAF pickups in it, while the Paul Reed has Seymour Duncans.

GUITAR: Have you switched to the new Boogie Simul-Class amplifiers?

CARLOS: I'm playing the new Boogies, the one that Steve Lukather is using. I got rid of the Marshalls, but I'm still flirting with the Gallien Krueger. The Boogies are the main working horse. Michael Bloomfield used to use three Twins, and the Boogie gives you that combination in one amplifier. You can get that loudness, that clean sound and that dirt. I've also been playing Celestion speakers and recently the new Boogie speakers, which do what the Celestions do but they hold up. I still use very few effects. I do use a Dod Chorus and Digital Delay and a Mutron Wah here and there. But it's like makeup, a little bit is possible, otherwise you look like a clown. A lot of people sound like they're hiding behind all that stuff and not giving you the naked truth. Andy Summers and Adrian Belew are two of the best at using effects very well.

GUITAR: Do you still make an X on stage during soundcheck to mark the spot for the best sustain?

CARLOS: Yes I still go out and make the X. Sometimes I don't and pay the price for it. Once you mark it, it's pretty close to the feedback you're going to get. Then you don't have to rely on that nasal distortion that pedals give you, although I've been fooling around with the Rockman. It sounds good in the headphones, but I still haven't made it sound that good with an amplifier or in the studio. I know that Ronnie Montrose knows how to do that, but I don't.

GUITAR: When you perform on stage what do you listen to for your anchor?

CARLOS: The high hat, foot and snare tells you where the column vertebrae is. That's the tree and the other stuff is the branches. That's why they call it fatback. There's no secret with the snare, foot and high hat; if you don't know where the one is you're a total bimbo. On another level, you've got to learn things so you can forget them. Like Miles tells John McLaughlin, you've got to play it like you don't know how to play. There's a certain truth to that. It means you've got to lose yourself to find yourself. In the process of doing that, you'll find the magic. ■